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by Laurence Donovan

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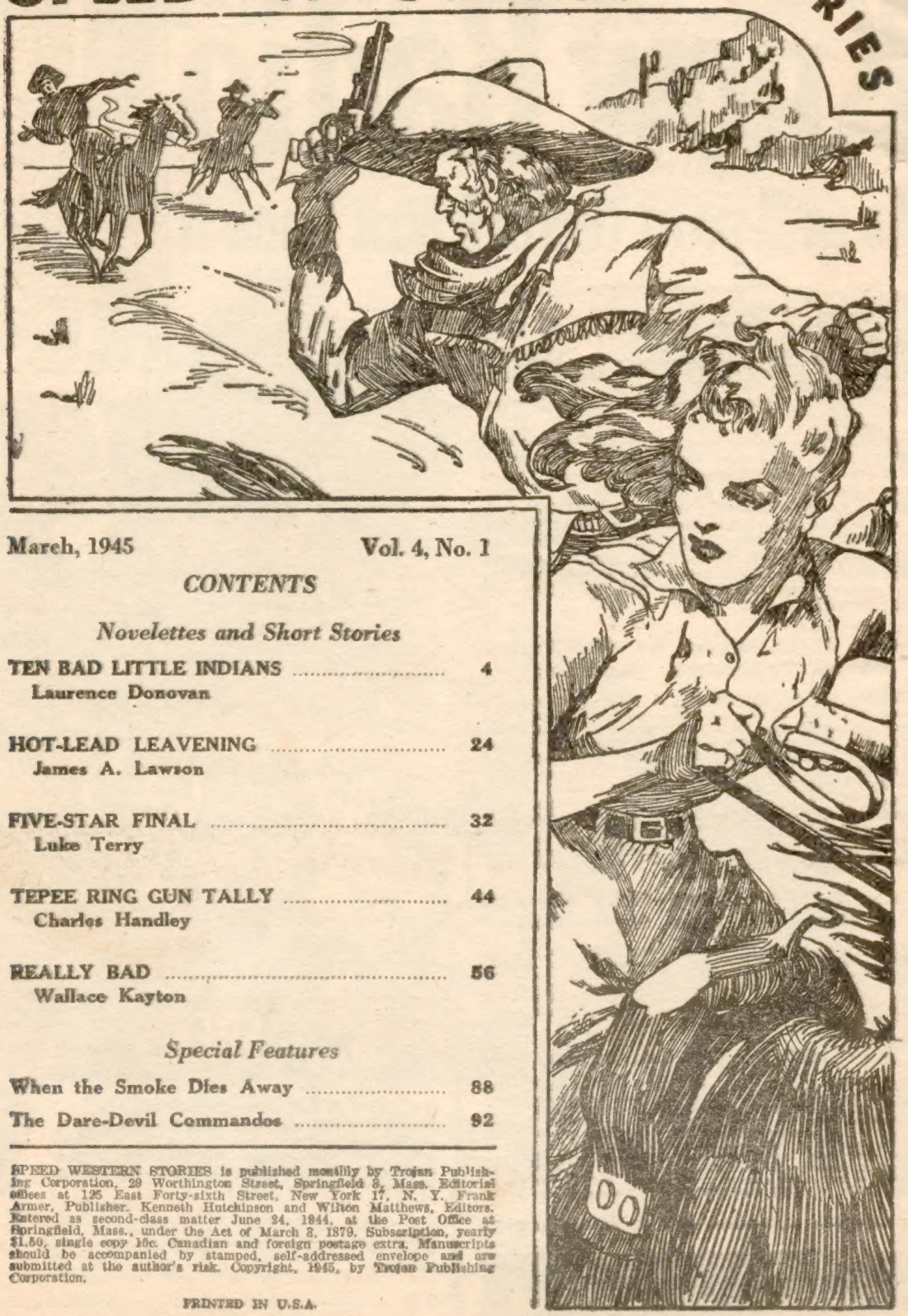

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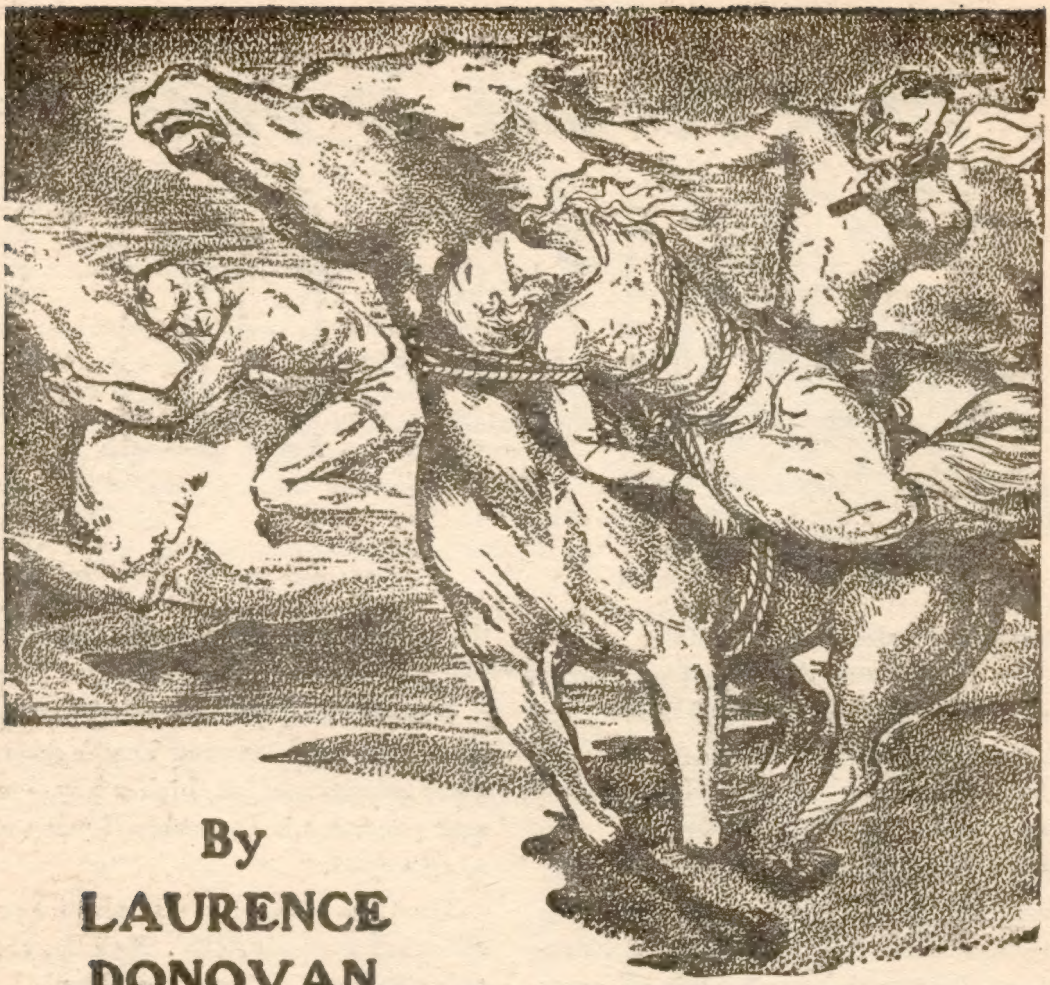


By
LAURENCE
DONOVAN

The emigrant wagon train was being led witlessly to destruction by a big-headed greenhorn from the East. Durango and his renegade redskins were on the warpath, and no one could stop those

Ten Bad Little Indians

LONG-EYE STERNE surveyed the thirty-odd covered wagons with approval. They were drawn up, tongues to tailgates, in a properly rounded protective circle. The fort thus improvised topped the one and only hummock of land hereabouts, giving a clean view of cleared, sloping ground for two hundred yards in all directions.

"This 'ere now Captain Echols must be underrated some," said Long-Eye Sterne, speaking to the twitching ears of his long-geared buffalo horse, Stormy. "Judgin' by the way the commissioner put it in his letter, Echols ain't nothin' but a shavetail who got his ideas of Injuns off a picture of a buck dancin' around nearly naked an' wavin' a scalpin' knife."

Sounds that filled Long-Eye Sterne

Eric Robb went to one knee in the mud and fired his rifle at a redskin torch bearer beside the bound captive white girl.

with a rare homesickness came from a short distance away. He had reined up Stormy in the cottonwoods and willows fringing the quiet, shallow creek. Laughing, chattering voices mingled with the splash of water.

"Jest like the women folks to be makin' it a Monday washday, Injuns or no," Long-Eye grinned, self consciously straightening his coonskin cap and brushing at the frayed edges of his buckskin shirt. "Maybe I'll git to see an' speak to Enna Caulder again, even if her old man is dead set against a mountain man he rates as half savage."

His own mention of Enna Caulder provoked a speculative glint in his dark, piercing eyes. It had been two years gone since he had tarried a week in the pioneer settlement on the Big Muddy where the Caulders had tried to take root, and whence the drought had evidently

sent them on with this wagon train westward.

But Sterne's half-smile faded from his mouth now and the wind-dark skin seemed to draw tighter over his high cheekbones. A man's voice, angry and commanding, broke into the pleasant cadence of the women's tongues:

"Eric Robb is a fool! I'm in command here! The murderin' redskins have been scoutin' the wagons for two days! They're waitin' in the hills all around us, an' this crazy Robb camps them wagons right out on top o' that rise where they can be picked out by the Injuns watchin' us! You've got to pull your duds out of the creek so's we can be on the move!"

Long-Eye Sterne scowled. The speaker could be none other than Captain Echols, of the U. S. Army, a West Point shavetail only recently commissioned because of a pressing emergency.

"The captain ain't as smart as I was opinin'," mused Sterne. "So it was old Eric Robb, the wagon boss, who picked out the hummock where any Injuns would have to come up to him."

Long-Eye Sterne scowled. The speaker ahead, when a challenging voice replied to the angered Captain Echols on a gay note:

"Why, captain, you wouldn't be wantin' us to be packin' our petticoats an' things without waiting to dry an' iron them, would you? Every last thing us women have got to wear is soakin' wet, an' would be all mildewed. We was countin' on doin' the dryin' an' ironin' tonight."

No other living girl had that spine-tickling voice. At least, not for Long-Eye Sterne. He guessed, shrewdly, the same thing applied to nearly all other males who came within its range.

IT SEEMED though that Captain Echols was not one of these other males. He appeared to be first, last and all the time a West Pointer of strictly shavetail principles.

"I've got only some twenty men to protect this wagon train!" he told her petulantly. "I'm giving the order to remove all women and clothes from the creek! I'm displacing Eric Robb as wagon boss, and we're moving up to the safety of some valley!"

Long-Eye Sterne pushed his horse ahead. Stormy could and did deerfoot noiselessly. The horse brought its rider upon the washday scene at the creek just in time.

"You men will take all of the clothes!" ordered Captain Echols who was prudently mounted. "These women are under my command, the same as the men! Waste no time!"

Long-Eye Sterne pulled up, remained motionless. He guessed if he lived to be a hundred he never again would witness such a scene. It was no time for laughter. Not with several hundred blood-mad Comanches infesting the nearest ridges.

Comanches, off their reservation, afire with the killing lust for revenge, determined to have the lives of these men and women, and the supplies of this wagon train to replace their own burned wickiups and pillaged crops.

Indeed it was no time for laughter to ride such a mountain man as had hunted and trapped with the redskins, and had the quarter blood of a Comanche grandmother in his veins.

But Long-Eye Sterne chuckled softly to himself.

He had always known that Enna Caulder was as likely a filly as was ever fashioned among womankind. Fair-haired and blue-eyed, as pretty as shining dewdrops on mountain grass, she had a tongue as nimble as a magpie's, with an impish mouth all red and sweet for quick smiling and maybe kisses.

But Sterne had never before seen quite so much of the witching Enna. Not like now as she stood knee-deep in the clear, rippling creek, her petticoats almost shamelessly hitched up to keep them dry.

Sterne wondered that this young Captain Echols, with the first downy beard on his chin and his ramrod back, could sit there so uncompromisingly and so straight. He sure enough was a shavetail with his mind rigidly set upon a single, if mistaken, purpose.

Two older soldiers, whose beet-red faces indicated they had been drinking

enough white corn whiskey to relish this chore, slid down the muddy creek bank toward the defiant girl. Enna Caulder's head was tossed back, her bright hair streaming, her eyes and mouth flashing a smile of daring derision.

"Take the clothes she's washing and bring her out!" snapped Captain Echols, staying safely in his saddle.

"The first one touches me'll wish he hadn't!" flared Enna Caulder, brandishing a tightly twisted wet garment which could be best identified by its whiteness and the ruffles on its legs.

"You heard what the cap'n said!" snarled one soldier, and made a quick grab.

"Slap-swooee!" That was the sound of the unnamed garment slapping across the reckless soldier's face and wrapping about his big ears, setting him down in the creek on the seat of his government-issue pants, which were too tight and had busted on him.

"You daggoned hellion!" rasped the other soldier, getting a handful of the girl's hair in strategic flank attack.

STERNE was just touching the steel to his horse, but he held up again. Eric Robb was nigh onto seventy. He was a little, age-bent old man with a completely bald head, but he was about as soft and easy to handle as a tight-rolled bundle of barbed wire.

It was Eric Robb who passed Captain Echols and his horse like some long-jumping grasshopper, his narrow but rawhide shoulders encased only in his red flannel shirt, his other shirt being in the women's creek washing.

"Yuh pernickety, pot-gutted, corn-topin' son!" shrilled old Eric Robb as he landed waist-deep in the creek. "I'll l'arn yuh to be puttin' yore paws onto women critters!"

The red-faced soldier, who had just managed to upset Enna Caulder so that her curving white legs splashed the water helplessly, was suddenly hoisted and slammed flat in the creek. Eric Robb yelled again and followed the first cracking blow of his fist under the soldier's ear with a wholly unmilitary tattoo of both fists upon the soldier's bulbous nose.

A few yards away down the creek, Long-Eye Sterne saw Jonathan Caulder likewise showing disrespect for the army blue as he choused another of Captain Echols' men in the mud.

"You try layin' a hand on my missus' washin' an', by gum, I'll drownd you deader'n a skinned an' spitted shoat!" roared Jonathan Caulder.

Enna Caulder had regained her feet. Her gaunt and capable ma charged out of the creek upon two more soldiers who were doing their humble best to obey the orders of the shavetail captain. Ma Caulder's mouth was grim and silent. How she could stop three brawny men in army blue and set them yelling with agony and clawing with both hands at their eyes might have seemed a mistake.

It was no miracle to Long-Eye Sterne. He had seen the liquid, yellow, home-made lye soap streaming from Ma Caulder's suds pan as she swung it across the faces of the three soldiers.

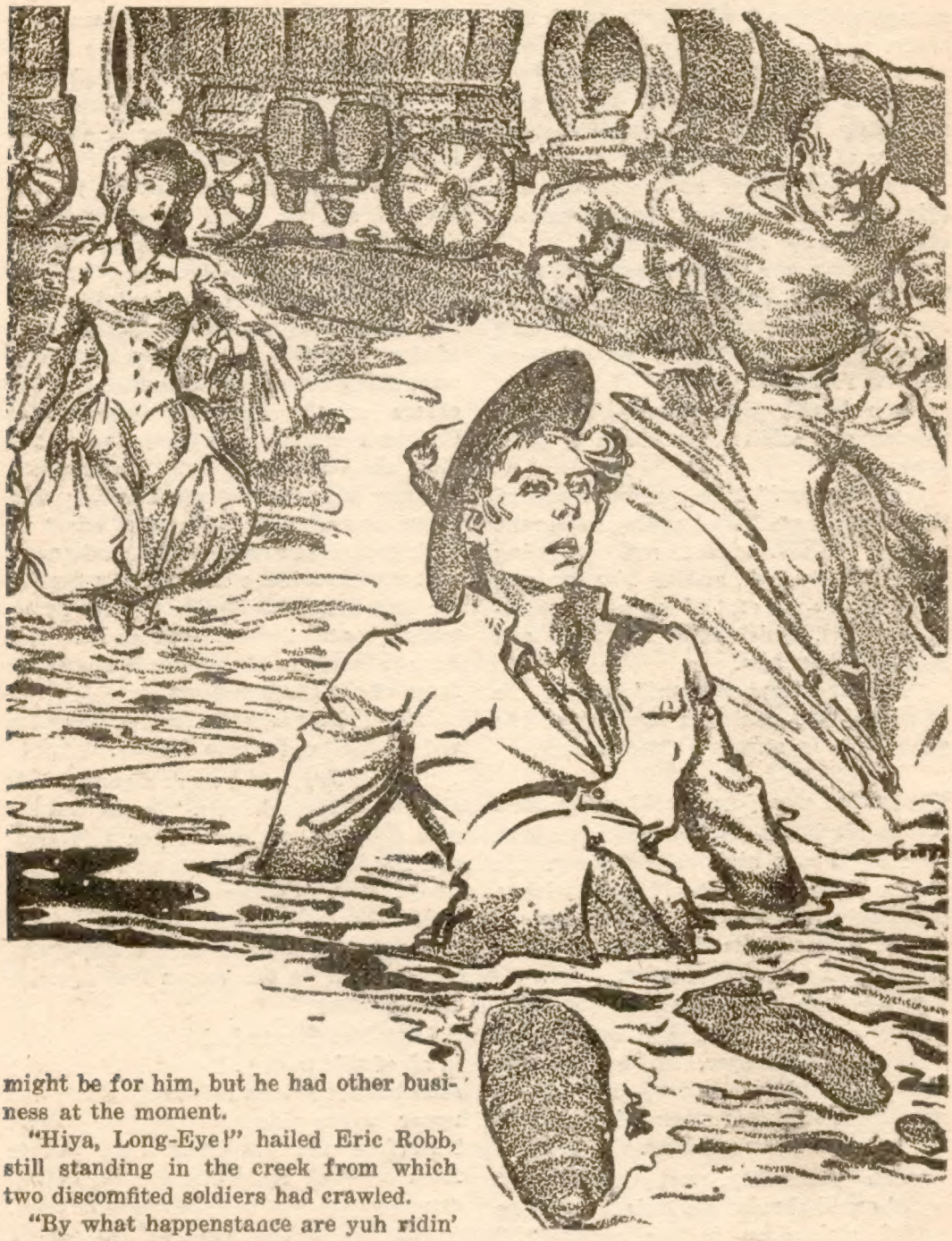
Eric Robb was standing, erect and a victor, facing Captain Echols.

"It's mutiny, and I won't stand for it!" shouted Captain Echols. "I'm having my men take the last one of you prisoners, and I'm holding you until we reach Fort Lodge! I'm ordering you tied up, Eric Robb! I'm responsible for seeing that you dumb plowhands aren't killed and scalped! I'll do the wagon bossing, and we're moving!"

Long-Eye Sterne had been doubly alert in all of this tumult. He realized how far such human sounds could carry over the upper barren ridges of the San Pablos. Therefore the mountain man, hunter from boyhood, and noted for his keened ears and eyes, had been listening intently.

The long-drawn howl of the coyote from the hills to the west and the answering wail from a ridge to the east were such as to have fooled even the men of the wagon train. Perhaps they would not know that coyotes never howl like that under a noonday sun.

Long-Eye Sterne rode forward with an uplifted hand, looking at Captain Echols, but keeping an eye cornered upon Enna Caulder. He hoped her sudden smile



might be for him, but he had other business at the moment.

"Hiya, Long-Eye!" hailed Eric Robb, still standing in the creek from which two discomfited soldiers had crawled.

"By what happenstance are yuh ridin' the San Pablos? Didn't 'low to see yuh this side o' Fort Lodge!"

Sterne flicked a hand at old Eric Robb, but he was studying the young, reddened face of the flustered Captain Echols. The army captain had given his order that was preliminary to moving the wagon train ahead, but he held up, looking curiously at Long-Eye Sterne and his worn, disreputable mountain-man attire.

"Hiya, Robb," said Sterne calmly, hauling up. "Got word the Comanches was off the strip an' figured they might pick out your wagons to git back some of what was robbed from 'em."

Sterne watched Captain Echols' thin lips tighten. The officer was long-faced and carried himself with all the best tradition of the West Point code following

"You daggoned hellion!" rasped the soldier, grabbing the girl's hair.

the Civil War. His eyes went from Sterne's worn coonskin cap to the frayed fringes of his buckskin shirt, and they held the scorn that any impeccably clad military man would feel for such a fron-

tier rouster.

"Who are you, and what do you mean uttering such a lie about the bloodthirsty redskins that murdered the San Pablos Indian agent!" demanded Captain Echols with clipped coldness.

"This one time, Captain Echols, I'll pass up what you've said," stated Sterne quietly. "I'm William Sterne, better known as Long-Eye to my friends. I'll even inform you as to what I mean. This wagon train is now in danger of bein' wiped out by several hundred Comanches whose wickiups were burned and whose crops were destroyed by orders of Colonel Hauser, your superior."

SOME TWENTY soldiers were gathering, not yet having carried out Captain Echols' order to take prisoners among the wagoneers. Captain Echols was bristling, glaring at Long-Eye Sterne.

"More-so-over, Captain Echols, I'd suggest that the wagon train remain comped in its present position," added Sterne. "With so many bloodthirsty Injuns scoutin' for a chance, I'd forget about this little wet-clothes ruckus. If yuh should be so unwise as to try holdin' Eric Robb, you'll not have one man of the train with you, an' yuh may be needin' all the help you can get before the wagons reach Fort Lodge."

Sterne feared Captain Echols would bust the bright buttons from his tightly drawn coat, but an older soldier stepped close to the officer's horse and spoke to him.

"It's not on account of your putting in, Sterne," said Captain Echols then. "I'm wanting only that these people should understand who is in command. It is for their own good. I won't make an prisoners, but I am personally bossing the wagons from here on. We will prepare to break camp at once and try to reach a sheltering valley."

"Why, the wet-eared—!" began Eric Robb, but Sterne silenced him abruptly.

"Captain Echols has the right as long as he's in command!" interrupted Sterne. "I've scouted through the hills. The Comanches are everywhere. They're poorly armed, but they have weight of numbers, Robb, you'll do well to pass up wagon bossin' for the time."

"Leastwise, Sterne, you do show some glimmer of sense," admitted Captain Echols. "I'm not afraid there are too many Comanches. Colonel Hauser had most of the company on the trail of the worst of the Indians, and he'll wipe them out."

"I'll maybe talk with yuh about that, Captain Echols," said Sterne. "I'd like to see yuh alone after I've said a good word to some friends."

"I can think of nothing of importance to talk over with you," replied Captain Echols stiffly, but Long-Eye Sterne was already over and dismounting beside Jonathan Caulder and Ma Caulder.

They were glad to see him again after two years, but Jonathan could not keep his disapproval of the mountain man out of his grim old face.

CHAPTER II

Hostage of Hate

"YOU TAKE a lot onto yourself, don't you, Mr. Long-Eye Sterne?" quizzed Enna Caulder, trying to get her rumpled petticoats below her knees as she came over. "You oughtta know an army officer isn't taking your high-an'-mighty manner of speaking. Come to think on it, you mentioned you was coming back in a little while when you left us two years ago!"

Long-Eye Sterne grinned, but he felt his ears reddening.

"Yuh be traipsin' along an' stirrin' up some grub, Enna," growled old Jonathan Caulder. "The way yuh got o' hitchin' up your duds is a shame to the nation."

Old Jonathan's stern gaze was upon Long-Eye, which made Sterne wonder what the old man would say if he knew he really was quarter-blood Comanche. Then Sterne widened his grin.

"Didn't trouble ridin' back, Miss Enna, 'cause I was sure yuh would be runnin' after me sooner or later," he said calmly.

"I think you'd best do as your pa says, Enna," put in her mother. "An' Jona-

than, you collect up them duds from the crick."

Sterne could see his words had roiled Enna until she was almost white with anger.

"Running after such as you?" The girl tossed her head back and laughed merrily. "Why, I'd as soon think of—of—setting my cap for Captain Echols! That's what!"

She turned in a swirl of her hiked-up petticoats. Sterne had always said the wrong thing when he was near her. The habit stayed with him.

"From what I've seen of the captain, he's choosey," he said.

Sterne was only a half-tamed mountain man. He had yet to learn he could not have said a worse thing to any woman.

"So Captain Echols is cheesey, is he?" Enna's voice was small and very cold. "Well, so am I, and I think I'll change the captain's mind."

As Enna flounced away, Ma Caulder smiled thinly.

"For a s'posed smart hunter, you're not usin' your head," said Ma Caulder. "I'll bet you put vinegar on the bait when you set a beaver trap."

Sterne guessed he did not have much of a way with women. But he had learned to understand gaunt and practical Ma Caulder. While Pa Caulder got the washed clothes together, Sterne talked fast in a low tone.

When he had finished, Ma Caulder said: "I'm takin' back what I said about yuh bein' smart, Long-Eye."

Sterne led his horse up to the wagons. Captain Echols was already there with his men. The wagoneers were acting hostile, but they were slowly harnessing their teams.

ERIC ROBB bustled over to Sterne. He was so mad that the top of his bald head had turned fiery red.

"I can stop 'im, Long-Eye," threatened Eric Robb. "What's got into yuh, agreein' with the stiff-necked, spavined son? You tellin' *me* to let 'im take over the bossin'!"

"Some things has to be done one way, some another," said Sterne. "For the time it'd be best maybe to give Captain Echols his head."

"But yuh know danged well that once them bloody Injuns git us into a valley, they'll ambuscade us, an' scalp the lot o' us!" howled Eric Robb.

"Maybe so, maybe not," stated Sterne. "Leastwise, I'm thinkin' we ain't movin' yet a spell. I'm havin' a palaver with Echols."

Captain Echols had set himself up in his own covered supply wagon. He had even posted a sentry in the opening at the rear.

The soldier on guard stuck out his bayoneted rifle.

"Captain Echols ordered you wasn't to bother him," stated the sentry.

The soldier could not have seen Sterne's hands move. It must have been all blurred to him for some little time. His rifle flew out of his hands. Before he could recover either his poise or his gun, Sterne was in the back of the wagon.

"I gave an order I wasn't seeing you, Sterne!" rapped out Captain Echols, clicking his teeth together. "Isn't that enough?"

"Nope. It ain't. I got business with you. Where'd Colonel Hauser head for after burnin' and spoilin' the Injun wickiups an' crops, an' how many men has he got?"

"Look here, my man! I don't have to talk—"

"If yuh don't talk, yuh've got no more chance of gittin' to Fort Lodge with all yore hair than yuh have of throwin' me out of yore wagon," said Sterne cheerfully. "The truth is that one outlaw Injun, Durango, an' nine others murdered the Indian agent an' looted two white cabins. Colonel Hauser took nigh a whole regiment to go try to git them ten bad Injuns, an' you was sent out with twenty men to guard this wagon train."

"There's no difference between Indians," snapped Captain Echols. "I don't know why I'm telling you, but most of the Comanches went away with the one you say is the outlaw Durango. They left only a handful of redskins to rob this train an' kill these stubborn, foolheaded

people. So I'm getting them into a protected valley where they can't find us tonight."

From three points came the low, long howl of coyotes. Sterne smiled grimly.

"Know what them calls are meanin', Captain Echols?"

"I haven't time to bother about the cries o' mild varmints, Sterne. Now if that's all you have to say, I'll see that the wagons start."

"It ain't quite all, captain. I don't know why I'm tellin' yuh either, but Durango has only nine Injuns with him, an' by this time he's give Colonel Hauser the slip an' doubled back. I wouldn't be su'prised if Durango is right handy an' there are at least one thousan' Comanches surroundin' the wagon trail."

"I don't believe it," rasped Captain Echols. "Now if that is all—"

"It ain't. The Comanches are only waitin' for some smart West Pointer to lead this wagon train into an ambuscade. 'Most any valley where they can git above the wagons will do."

"I'm taking no advice from any bounty-collecting scout that would likely as not favor the redskins if they paid him!" exploded Captain Echols. "If you stay with this train, you'll take my orders. We're moving out!"

Captain Echols was shaking and white with rage. Sterne had his own wrath, but he kept it frozen inside. Anyway, he figured the insults were about even between them. And Sterne did not want to change the present set-up until he had the chance for a bit of scouting after night would fall.

Sterne walked away from the wagon without a glance at the cussing sentry he had upset. A couple of wagoneers were already hitched and pulling wagons out of the circle.

Sterne looked across the space within the wagons and lifted his hand. He turned and sauntered away toward his horse.

MA CAULDER'S gaunt, formless figure appeared suddenly. She was hurrying, with a bucket of water in her hand.

"Eric Robb! Cap'n Echols!" came Ma Caulder's high-pitched cry. "Don't you dare go for movin' any wagon! Enna! Roust yourself and get some more water on that fire!"

The wagoneers with the hitched teams were staring at Ma Caulder. Captain Echols poked his blond head out of his wagon and jumped to the ground. He let out with a shout.

"What is this? Who is countermanding my orders?"

"Your orders, Mister Shavetail?" screamed Ma Caulder. "Great goshen! You're so smart, maybe so you can order the Lord A'mighty to stop Missus Larkin from havin' her baby!"

Sterne withdrew discreetly between two wagons. The men who were already hitched started dropping their traces. Others halted in their harnessing.

"A baby? A baby?" Captain Echols lost control of his voice the second time he said it. "By all that's holy, get those teams hitched. We haven't time to have a baby!"

"Reckon you ain't havin' this baby, mister," drawled one of the wagoneers. "If Missus Larkin wants to have her a baby, there's none o' us budgin' until she's done had it!"

Captain Echols was raving, staring at forty burly wagoneers who had ceased hitching. Even Captain Echols and his soldiers could see that army regulations had no article to cover the matter of Mrs. Larkin having a baby.

Eric Robb bobbed up between the wagons near Sterne. He was rubbing his bald head.

"Suthin' danged funny about that, Long-Eye!" grunted the old wagon boss. "I didn't know nothin' about Missus Larkin gonna have a baby!"

"Neither did Missus Larkin until Ma Caulder told her." Sterne grinned.

Enna Caulder came from a fire with a steaming bucket of water. When she saw Sterne she tossed her head back in the way she had. She deliberately changed her course to pass near Captain Echols and her bright petticoats were flipping something scandalous.

Sterne had no time to take sober thought on this. He was giving his slow,

Sterne's hands moved swiftly, disarmed the tough soldier.

searching eyes to the smoky ridges that narrowed and funneled into a pass where the wagon train soon must go. There had been no smoke sign, only the coyote howls and occasionally clear whistling of Bob White quail, where there might be no quail.

"P'RAPS a thousand Comanches with needle guns an' bows," muttered Sterne. "An' unless somethin' happens to take the edge off their anger there'll be a massacre to stand as a black mark for another generation."

Long-Eye Sterne had scouted nearby, but not into the strung-cut files of hidden Indians. He was convinced that Durango, blood-hungry outlaw, and his few white-hating braves would have returned was perhaps fifty or sixty miles away at this time.

Simply enough, the wily Durango would have laid false sign for Colonel Hauser and his several hundred soldiers. Hauser was perhaps fifty or sixty miles away at this time.

"There's but one way to head off Durango," mused Sterne. "I'll have to use my friendship with old Tawawa. If only I could first see Spotted Elk and have him smooth the way for a powwow. . . ."

Spotted Elk was the stalwart son of the old Chief Tawawa. Sterne had shared blankets with Spotted Elk, hunted bison. Once their blood had commingled when Sterne had toted Spotted Elk to the wickiup of Tawawa after a cornered wildcat had torn his arm.

STERNE desired to see Spotted Elk. But not quite so soon as it happened. There was a shout, a quick order from Captain Echols, a wholly useless sounding of the bugle.

Wagoneers crowded to the outside line, some suddenly gripping their weapons, everything from one-shot pistols to Civil War muskets. Only Sterne did not move quickly, or go to his horse for his Sharps' buffalo gun. Sterne stayed beside a wagon, swearing deep oaths.

Two soldiers who had been on outpost down by the creek cottonwoods pushed the tall young Comanche roughly between them. The Indian was staggering with dizziness and blood was upon his face from a gouged wound over one eye.

The Comanche was none other than Spotted Elk. Sterne remained motionless, whispering his own seething rage. For all that he had been hurt, Spotted Elk was lithe and powerful, and he was maintaining buch more dignity than the bearded soldiers who held his arms.

Sterne saw that Spotted Elk wore no war paint. He was clad in buckskin, much as Sterne. His long black hair was bound back by a strip of red flannel. His dark face with its straight nose showed a nobility of breeding far above that of the ruffians holding him.

"What's this?" demanded Captain Echols, striding forward.

"Damn spyin' redskin was sneakin' through the trees to spy us out under cover of a white rag to save his skin if he was nabbed," reported one of the soldiers. "But he would-a knifed Marlow here in the back if I nadn't belted him one."

"I've heard of that low Indian trick, pretending a truce to put white men off their guard," said Captain Echols. "Give me the knife."

"The red devil throwed it in the creek," explained the soldier.

Long-Eye Sterne stepped forward quickly. His own eyes warmed from the blood of his heart as he looked at Spotted Elk and spoke in Comanche:

"I am here, brother."

Spotted Elk's features did not change an iota. But there was a deep light in his black eyes as he looked down at Sterne.

"*Enju*—it is good," the Indian said quietly.

"Need I ask about the knife?" said Sterne.

"I came with the truce," spoke Spotted Elk in his own tongue, as if that simple explanation covered it all.

"Sterne!" Captain Echols was glaring. "I demand to know all that is said!"

"Spotted Elk is the son of Tawawa, the chief," stated Sterne. "He had no knife. He was bringing the truce. Your man has lied."

"What in thunderation?" rasped Cap-

tain Echols. "You're supposed to be a white man, Sterne! And you choose to take the word of a sneaking Indian against one of your own kind?"

"I choose to take the word of one of my own kind, which in this case is all white man inside," said Sterne with slow deliberation.

ONE SOLDIER bluffed at starting toward Sterne, but Captain Echols waved him back.

"Because I hear you've a sort of record as a scout, I'll overlook what you've implied," clipped off Echols. "We'll make an example of this red killer. Tie him to a wagon wheel where others who are spying may see him. Strip off his shirt. We'll show these Comanches what the white man thinks of them."

Spotted Elk's face showed no emotion. Sterne put one hand inside his shirt, touched a folded paper, then withdrew it. He had been greatly tempted to reveal an authority he might have used from the first. He resisted it.

This was not the time to precipitate a fight that might be forced upon him. He held a power he might wield, but he knew the temper of the Comanches was such at this moment that he might be bringing down the vengeance of old Tawawa upon the hated soldiers of Captain Echols.

Sterne controlled himself to say, "If yuh have the low mind to lay the whip onto the son of Chief Tawawa, Echols, yuh sure are signin' the death warrant of every man, woman an' child in this wagon train."

Spotted Elk stood erect, his dignity above all of the hate of the white men holding him.

There was momentary silence. It was broken by long, drawn-out howls of coyotes, the whistling of quail. The drifting signals formed a complete circle about the wagon train.

Captain Echols at least had the sense to fear an attack in force he might provoke.

"Bind the Indian and put him in my wagon!" he commanded. "As for you, Sterne, I'll brook no further interference! As long as you remain with this train, you will keep a closed mouth!"

Eric Robb almost choked when Long-Eye Sterne turned away without replying.

"Ding-dang it all!" sputtered Eric Robb. "Long-Eye's actin' as if he hadn't no more spunk than a sick polecat!"

The wagoneers who had long heard the almost legendary reputation of Long-Eye Sterne looked down their noses and avoided his gaze as he walked away.

CHAPTER III

Night Is for Action

CAPTAIN ECHOLS stalked about the wagon camp and fumed. In the covered wagon of the Larkins there was brooding expectancy. Ma Caulder bustled about. Nate Larkin sat on the wagon tongue and looked anything but happy.

It was all a surprise to Nate Larkin that his wife was supposed to be having a baby. He was sorely puzzled.

Long-Eye Sterne had apparently surrendered abjectly to the rule of Captain Echols. He took Stormy down into the cottonwoods, hitched him to graze, and stretched out. Sterne could pack away a week's refreshing of his hard vitality in two or three hours' sleep.

Tonight he had to be prepared. Old Tawawa had sent Spotted Elk with a truce for a powwow. In that there was hope. Tawawa must know by now that Durango and his band of killers were in the vicinity.

Sterne knew that Tawawa's whole tribe, including the squaws and the children, had been robbed and driven from their homes and carefully tilled corn, potatoes and tobacco by the white soldiers. Sterne viewed it as the same old story of a rigidly stupid army code that laid the sins of a few Indians upon all the red people.

"A fine mess of fat we'd be in if there was enough Injuns to retaliate upon the whites for the crimes committed by a few outlaw renegades of our race," reasoned Sterne.

Only a short time before the Commis-

sioner of Indian Affairs in Washington had gravely considered this same problem. Keeping an army of nondescripts in line after some of the excesses following the Civil War had been beyond the experience of some of the green shavetails with West Point prejudices. There were not enough older, Indian-wise officers to go around.

After some two hours, Sterne knew something had awakened him. He lay motionless, as always when a sense of danger came to him, His eyes opened and has head turned slowly.

He saw that a smoke-hazed dusk was settling about the camped wagon train. By this time he knew that old Tawawa would be sure of the white men's treachery in seizing Spotted Elk.

Unless Tawawa could be appeased and the serious mistake of Captain Echols' men be undone, every white person in the wagon train was doomed. Once they had tasted blood, with the memory of their despoiled crops and their homeless families goading them, the Comanches would kill ruthlessly.

At the risk of his attitude being misunderstood, Sterne had waited for darkness. Night was for action. He must reach Tawawa while the old chief would still be letting his wisdom prevail.

The sound of voices had roused Sterne. He saw the speakers now. Enna Caulder and Captain Echols were standing very close together.

Their voices were too low for even Sterne's keen ears to distinguish words. Their conversation appeared to be spirited. Sterne might have missed the sickness that made a weakness in his stomach if he could have heard what was being said.

"It's nothing but a trick, I'm sure, Miss Caulder," was the angry accusation of Captain Echols. "I don't believe the Larkin woman is ill. It was all planned by your mother and this renegade Sterne."

"If you're smart, Captain Echols, you won't spread that belief around," replied the spirited girl.

At this juncture, not wishing to eavesdrop, Sterne moved silently. But he did not miss Enna Caulder's final words, for which she had suddenly raised her voice:

"We Caulders have no special liking for Long-Eye Sterne. I hope he leaves this camp before I lay eyes on him again."

The words had been uttered in defense of her mother, but Sterne had no means of knowing that.

Perhaps Sterne would not have acted so hastily, would have waited until later darkness and sleep was upon the camp, but he was mad clear through. Moreover, Captain Echols was here and Spotted Elk was a prisoner in the officer's wagon.

STERNE made sure there was but one soldier on guard at the Echols wagon. The wagoneers had assembled about a low, smoky fire in the middle of the camp.

Sterne's approach to the single sentry was noiseless. A mountain cat could not have stalked its prey more effectively. When he was but a few feet away, Sterne launched himself from his toes.

The scout's long fingers gripped and closed. He throttled the soldier enough to prevent a cry. He put him to sleep with a punch under one ear that dropped the sentry cold.

Slicing the rawhide thongs off Spotted Elk, Sterne cautioned quiet. He spoke in Comanche to the humiliated brave:

"It is not good that my brother's heart should beat with hate," said Sterne. "Our blood has become as one. By that I'm askin' only what will spare the innocent and give back to your people the homes and lands they have lost."

The proud young son of Tawawa flexed his bronzed arms before uttering considered speech.

"Even for the brother of my blood I cannot sway my father. If Long-Eye heeds wisdom, he will journey from this place at once. I cannot be sure Tawawa has not already moved to strike."

Sterne had been in the wagon but some three minutes. He knew there was need for haste. He realized he would be regarded as a renegade white man now. If he failed, that was the way the record of the future would always be written.

The mountain man's iron-hard arm reached out, embraced Spotted Elk—and they rolled from the saddles.

"I must have speech with Tawawa, tonight," said Sterne. "We will go together."

"My father sent the truce," replied Spotted Elk. "The army men of crooked

tongues wrapped the white cloth around a knife that never was. That is beyond Tawawa to endure—"

Sterne was aware this could go on and on. His time was running out, and his hope of appeasing Chief Tawawa was thin.

Excited voices shouted from the lower side of the wagon camp. Sterne reached the opening in the wagon canvas. Soldiers and wagoneers were running.

Sterne dropped all the dignity with which his words had been clothed.

"Somethin' busted loose, Spotted Elk, an' we've gotta make an escape before Captain Echols gits back here."

They were as silent as shadows leaving the wagon. Sterne made for his horse and another pony he had saddled. He heard Eric Robb jabbering and saw a group of soldiers milling around like spooked cattle.

"The murderin', woman-stealin' hellions!" shrilled Eric Robb. "They've tooken Enna Caulder, the red devils! They busted Cap'n Echols' head, an' took the scalp of the sentry!"

Here it was in all its gory reality. All that he had hoped to stave off with words of wisdom had broken loose. The news that Enna Caulder had been seized by the redskin riders fired Sterne's blood to madness.

He gripped Spotted Elk by the arm fiercely. For the moment all his normally cool judgment was lost in a whirlwind of emotion.

"We're no longer blood brothers," he gritted through set teeth. "Tawawa takes a hostage for his son. Our trails divide, Spotted Elk. Go!"

Out of his head for the time, Sterne was starting toward the group of soldiers coming up from the creek. Then he heard a voice that partly refuted Eric Robb's words.

Captain Echols was alive, conscious, and shouting furiously:

"Sound the assembly! Saddle and look to your arms! The red devils seized Enna Caulder! They killed and scalped one of our men! We'll attack in force! I'll show them what white men are like!"

SOLDIERS were dashing for their horses. Old Eric Robb voiced a startling truth:

"That's jest fine, Cap'n Echols! Jest fine! But what in Sam Hill yuh aimin' to attack in force? There ain't so much as one redskin showed or let out a whoop! If they was meanin' to git to the wagons, ding dang it, they'd have been amongst us whilst yuh was lallygaggin' in the cottonwoods with Enna Caulder!"

"He's dangnation kerrect!" spat out another wagoneer. "Did yuh *see* how many of them Injuns busted onto yuh? Mebbe so if you'd been smart you'd have hearkened to Long-Eye Sterne an' not spilt yore spleen over the son of a Comanche chief!"

Sterne held up then, because Spotted Elk had caught his arm.

"My brother loses the spirit of truth and wisdom because he thinks only of the white squaw," said Spotted Elk.

"He forgets this is not the way of Tawawa. My father has many braves when the time comes for him to strike. Tawawa is old and wise, his years are too many for foolish haste that could bring only death to his oldest son. Consider it, my brother."

Sterne was all at once returned to his cold judgment. Spotted Elk was as right as rain. Tawawa could not be the fool to send out a small scouting band to murder and carry away a single white woman.

But there was the possibility though that some of his younger and more reckless young men might have conducted such a raid. . . .

"Find Long-Eye Sterne! Every man stand by!" Echols was shouting.

Sterne knew then what was coming. Captain Echols had reached his wagon. He had found the unconscious sentry and the absence of his prisoner.

"When you find Long-Eye Sterne, shoot to kill!" Echols was in a fuming rage, greater because there was already muttering among the wagoneers. "He's freed the sneakin' redskin spy!"

Ma Caulder's angry voice rang out:

"You lily-livered shavetail! If you had a lick of sense you'd keep your mind off

women! You brought this onto us, and my only gal is gone! I'm sayin' if you find Long-Eye Sterne, *he'd* best be put in command! There's not one corn-swiggin' soldier amongst you could trail a bull ox through a wheat stand!"

The decision was not now for Sterne to make. It had been laid out for him.

"We ride, Spotted Elk," he cautioned.

"I have been Tawawa's friend. But if any harm has come onto Enna Caulder, more than blood of brothers will flow this night in the council."

Sterne was trying to still the pounding pulse that hammered home a possible dismaying truth. It was that Durango and his ruthless band had seized Enna Caulder.

CHAPTER I V

The Hardest Choice

SOME soldiers were mounting. Under Captain Echols' confusing orders some were fanning out around the wagon camp. The slow curtain of the San Pablos darkness was being drawn.

Long-Eye Sterne and Spotted Elk guided their mounts to the twisting channel of the creek where green growth and bank mud muffled the footfalls of the horses. They could hear the searching soldiers shouting to each other, which was contrary to all sense when opposed to skulking Comanches who had undoubtedly drawn a wide ring about the wagons.

"We'll go to the lodge of Tawawa," said Sterne. "Spotted Elk will forgive the words of a crazy tongue which denied he was the brother of Long-Eye?"

"When ears are filled with shouting and alarm they cannot hear other speech, my brother," said Spotted Elk gravely, and Sterne's angered outburst was as if it had never been.

Soldiers splashed into the creek near them. The shadow of their mounted figures were seen. Oaths and the cracking of rifles came together, lead whistling through the willows along the creek. Sterne's horse was gouged and stung by a bullet, but Sterne pulled the horse down.

Spotted Elk was unarmed. Sterne refrained from seizing the buffalo gun in his saddle boot. Nor did he touch his belted revolver.

"They've spotted us an' they'll run us right into Tawaw's camp," stated Sterne. "We'll hafta lay a false sign an' double back."

Spotted Elk grunted suddenly, reeled in the saddle but made no greater outcry. Sterne was over beside him. The Indian's shoulder was blood-bathed from a deep wound.

"My father's lodge tops the blue clay bluff north of the creek pass," said Spotted Elk. "If I fail, you will go there, Long-Eye."

The soldiers were pounding closer. Others were joining the first to start shooting. The air became filled with a vicious buzzing.

"We will go together," announced Sterne. "Set yourself, an' fall off with me. Our hosses will go on. The soldiers will pursue our hosses."

They whipped around a bend in the creek. Sterne had his buffalo gun gripped in one hand. His other iron-hard arm reached out, embraced Spotted Elk—and they rolled from the saddles.

Sterne took most of the impact, with the Indian's weight upon him as they fell. He pulled the young Comanche into the deep creek weeds.

Cursing, shooting soldiers rode past, the flying hoofs of their horses splattering mud and water into Sterne's face, they were so close. The pursuit swept on.

Spotted Elk had staunched the blood of his wound.

"There is a gullied thicket of thorns along the ridge that makes a trail to the bluff of blue clay," advised Spotted Elk. "My brother will take that way. I will rest here."

Sterne would have none of that. He feared that soon the soldiers might overtake the riderless horses. They would return to comb the hillside. He compelled the Indian to make his way with him, although it slowed the progress up the ridge.

"The fools," said Sterne. "Durango is only bidin' his time. The seizing of the

girl an' the quick retreat was aimed at drawin' Echols' men out of the wagon camp. That wily outlaw would reckon on the wagoneers joinin' the soldiers. Durango's small band then could strike with hope of there being nobody but women an' children to defend the camp."

SPOTTED ELK was embittered, but he was of a breed of Comanche about whom the younger post officers knew nothing.

"My brother must leave me. Only his wisdom could counsel the white men against such a surprise."

Sterne realized that was now impossible. His own possibly mistaken action, his reluctance to take over an authority he could have had with the public humiliation of another man, had put him in a position where he could not now take sudden command.

They had reached the gully of the thorn thicket. For this moment they were safe from the soldiers. Reasoning out the possibility of being able to convince Captain Echols or the wagoneers of the true situation, Sterne figured that too much would be counted against him.

Even to split the camp between army men and settlers would make them easier prey for Durango. Another thought influenced his decision. The life of Enna Caulder was also in the balance.

A killing devil like Durango would keep the girl alive, use her as a visible hostage to compel a surrender or perhaps a tricky truce that could put lead to a massacre.

"We'll go on," announced Sterne. "Durango's raid was on account of an opportunity. He might hold off until he could talk some of Tawawa's hot-headed young men into helpin' him."

Sterne's reasoning was good. It was quickly proved out. The gully of the thorn thicket ascended toward the top of the long bluff where Tawawa's lodge had been placed.

Sterne saw the first flicker of the burning fire through the dense growth. It was steady as a cooking fire or as—?

The veteran scout tried to drive out the thought of that other fire. But it persisted to direct quicker action.

"Remain here," he said to Spotted Elk. "I'll make a foray ahead an' see what this may be."

The Indian appeared weakened and slumped to the ground.

Sterne wormed his way through the thorns, keeping well up on a side of the deep gully. The blaze was steady, grew brighter. He eased the buffalo gun forward, looked to its priming.

Here was the place to seek for higher vantage. The builders of the fire might be some of Tawawa's advanced guard. Or it might be the little band headed by Durango.

Sterne had climbed almost to the rim of the gully. Guttural murmuring came from the vicinity of the fire-lit space still hidden by the interlacing thorn bushes upon which berries of the season hung thick and ripe.

In another half minute Sterne would have emerged to a clear view of the apparent camp. Then he heard the cracking of bushes below him in the bottom of the gully, fifty yards or more down.

STERNE started dropping back soundlessly, swearing silently over this unforeseen movement. Perhaps Durango had camped here and now was descending for an attack upon the sparsely guarded wagon train.

There were quick, angry words in Comanche. There was an abrupt clash of weapons, wood and steel striking together. One lone cry, never to be mistaken for other than the Comanche death call, smote upon Sterne's ears and seemed to smother his heart.

After that came more crackling of the dried bushes below. Indians who had descended the gully were rushing back toward the fire they had just left.

Sterne reached the place of the encounter. Alert for any lingering killer, he groped about until he came upon that which he sought but feared to find. His hand passed over the still features, lingered upon the high, always proud forehead of the dead Comanche as if by his very will he might bring back life.

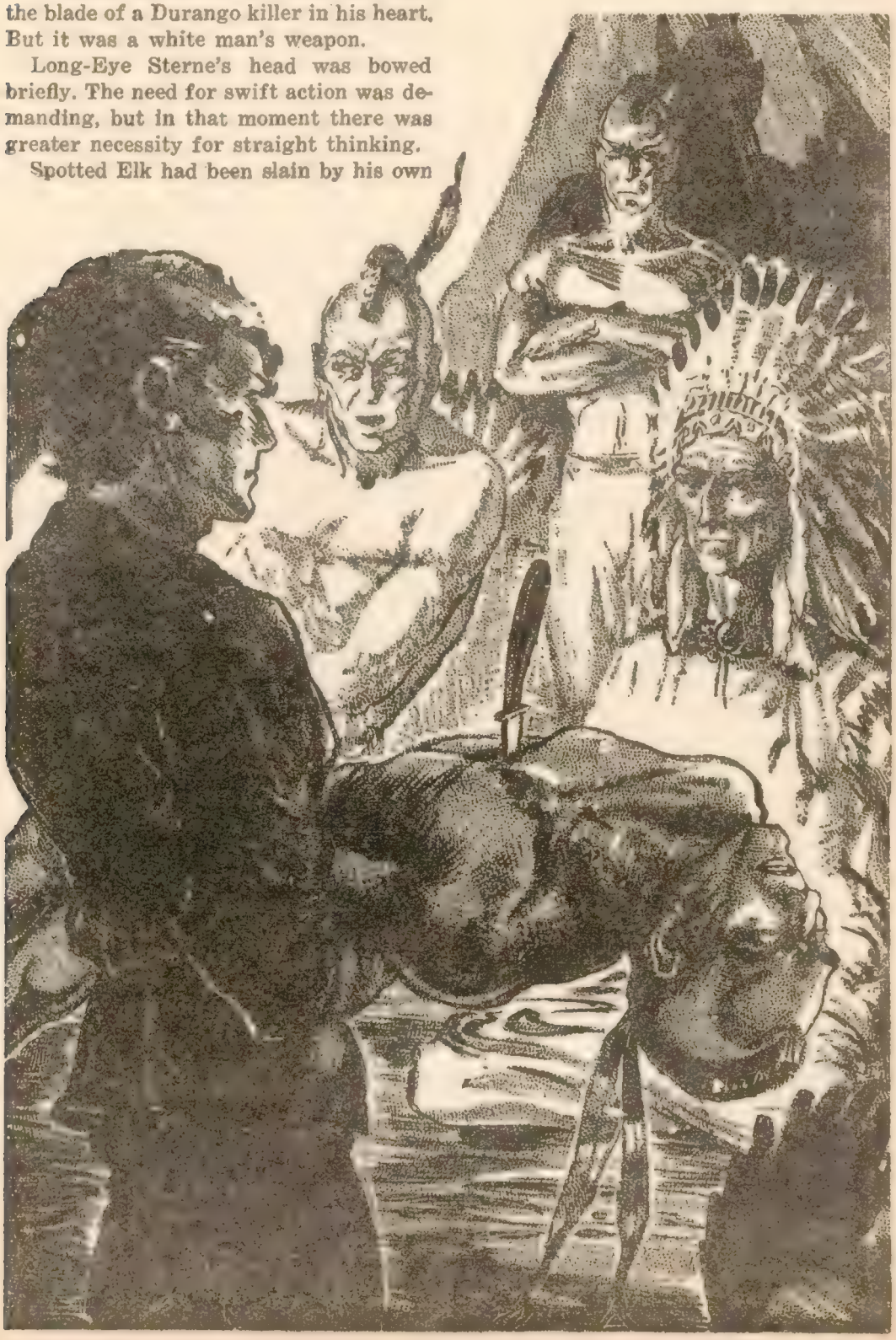
It could not be so! But the beaver knife sticking into the bared breast of Spotted Elk proved that it was.

The son of old Tawawa had died with the blade of a Durango killer in his heart. But it was a white man's weapon.

Long-Eye Sterne's head was bowed briefly. The need for swift action was demanding, but in that moment there was greater necessity for straight thinking.

Spotted Elk had been slain by his own

"I have brought Spotted Elk home to the lodge of his father," Sterne said.



outlaw people, but his long, black hair was still bound intact. And the body had been left as it had fallen.

The wily Durango could have but one purpose. He had wanted a sure argument to draw old Tawawa and his thousand warriors into widespread war upon the whites. Here he had it.

By leaving Spotted Elk thus, with his whole scalp, Durango could represent to Tawawa that his son had been brutally murdered by the white men of the camp to which he had gone with a truce.

Probably the knife had been taken from a murdered trapper.

Long-Eye Sterne stood for half a minute with his coonskin cap held in his hands. He lifted his eyes and his whispered words were a brief prayer to the Great Spirit of the Comanches.

STERNE realized that already a messenger might have been dispatched by Durango. It would convey to the chief the false tale of how Durango had found the body of the chief's son with a white man's knife in the heart.

Sterne cached his heavy buffalo gun. A minute later he was climbing out of the gully. The weight of Spotted Elk upon his shoulder could not compare with the heaviness pressing upon his heart.

He followed the gully rim, planning to circle the fire of Durango cautiously. But the blaze appeared to leap out at him from a cleared space and Sterne placed the body upon the ground to make a brief reconnaissance.

The scene in the bowl of the clearing below leaped out at Sterne with devastating detail. The fire was under a cooking pot. But the blaze reflected upon the figure bound rigidly to the bole of a small alder.

"Enna?" grated Sterne, and within himself he knew then that he had been a fool for not returning to the Missouri two years before.

He had believed that his pride had been great enough to put the girl out of his heart, knowing that as a rough mountain man he had been despised by old Jonathan Caulder, her father. That had made him consider that he was the grandson of a Comanche grandmother, and caused him to believe Enna Caulder would afterward hate him if she learned the truth.

But seeing her there, her head drooping forward with a flowing veil of fair hair about her bared white shoulders, Sterne knew a madness such as had never before come to him. His impulse was to draw his Colt and rush blindly to an attack.

He had to put that away. The tall, hawk-nosed Durango, outlaw killer, was even then inflicting his presence upon the bound girl. He was uttering words in Comanche, which Sterne could be thankful the girl would not understand.

Sterne counted seven Indians around the fire. In one of their forays they had chanced upon firewater. The jug was being passed around. But the Indians were armed with muskets and lances, and by the wiliness of their leader they were kept on the alert.

STERNE realized he stood little chance of freeing the girl. He might account for three or four Indians, but the odds were too great. Even if he could succeed in cutting the rawhide strips that held Enna, it was more than likely she would be struck down in the fight that must follow.

Durango was boasting!

"When the braves of Tawawa have joined Durango in avenging the murder of his son, all those with the wagons will die. Then the pretty white one will hearken to Durango. Only by the white one's spoken word may her own people be spared. Already two of my fleetest messengers bear the word to Chief Tawawa. Durango has so spoken."

Sterne clenched his fists as Enna lifted her head, staring at the redskin outlaw. He was sure the tortured girl could not understand the language, but the sense of Durango's speech had been of a tone and gesture to make her know the truth.

The girl cried out, her words coming clearly.

"You're a big fool, a chicken-hearted polecat! No matter what happens to me,

you'll never escape the one whose eyes see farther and whose guns shoot straighter than those of any other living man—"

All of Sterne's will was required to restrain him then as Durango spat viciously and slapped his hand across the girl's unprotected mouth. Durango had never been closer to death as Sterne aimed his Colt, sure that he could not miss.

There came between Sterne and the figure of the bound girl the vision of other women, of children playing about the wagons, of more than a hundred souls whose continued existence depended upon his choice of this moment.

His heart seemed to stop as Sterne turned, slipped back to the body of Spotted Elk, and lifted the corpse to his shoulder. He must reach Tawawa before the slow decision of the Comanche council would seal the fate of the wagon train and all the soldiers who were guarding it under a hotheaded, unwise commander.

CHAPTER V

Long-Eye Speaks

LONG-EYE STERNE might have outdistanced the Comanche messengers of Durango, he might have won the race against the drunken killers, who had been sent with word of Spotted Elk's murder —but he chose to carry with him the body of the chief's son. Sterne was conscious of the one invincible advantage he held. He was trusted by the Comanches. He had bedded with them, shared their meager meals of buffalo jerkin and wild maize. He was three-quarters white but his tongue had never twisted.

Here in the San Pablos, under the shadow of the towering Grenadier Peaks, was the ancestral lodge of old Tawawa. Deer were no longer plentiful in these bleak and rugged mountains. Guns of the white man had sent them into the far fastnesses.

Long-Eye Sterne thought deeply of the turn of mind that had rejected what the Comanches had regarded as false promises of the "Great White Father." Chief Tawawa had turned from the better living in the watered reservation of the valley to go back to the wild ways of his ancestors.

A sheet of lightning revealed the long lodge of cured deerskin in which, even now, the last council of old Tawawa was being held. With the burden of Spotted Elk over his shoulder, Sterne caught the moving shadow of the pantherlike Indian figure he knew to be one of the Durango messengers. A slap of rain crossed his face like the tears of the mountains weeping for the dead Spotted Elk.

Sterne halted. One messenger from Durango was standing outside the lodge. Through the slitted opening, Sterne saw the seated warriors of Tawawa. Before them stood the figure of the other Durango messenger. Sterne's keen ears picked out his lying words:

"Your son, Chief Tawawa, was killed by the white men in the blue clothes. We found him with a white man's bayonet thrust through his heart."

Sterne could see into the smoking light of the torches, the wrinkled face of the old chief. Tawawa was seated cross-legged, in the circle of older men, while all about the lodge two hundred or more younger warriors daubed with the clay of battle, were already writhing in a dance that meant death.

In response to the word of his son's murder, the old chief spoke no word, but he raised his hand commanding the quieting of the beginning war dance. Long-Eye Sterne acted with the swiftness that had made him famous as a mountain man. He placed the body of Spotted Elk upon the ground. With a quick, stalking strike of a cougar he came upon the other Durango messenger. He had him locked in his arms, bent the back of his head and cracked his spine before the Comanche knew what had struck him.

Three minutes later the messenger from Durango inside the lodge was still reciting his crooked words, the younger warriors were getting the feel of their weapons, and old Tawawa's wrinkled face had assumed a grim mask of vengeance.

Sterne stepped through the door of the

(Continued on page 70)

HOT-LEAD

THE slender stranger, shoulders hunched in his ragged jumper, stood warming himself in the Jinglebob Saloon when the door opened, admitting Deputy Sheriff Blackie Mitoga and a blast of frigid air. Stomping back to the stove, the hawk-nosed, surly lawman stared at the smaller man and scowled. Matching both the scowl and the stare, the stranger showed neither fear nor respect, but his greenish eyes flashed his sudden, instinctive dislike for the big deputy.

Nettled, Mitoga growled, "Scrub, whoinell are you?"

"Lon Solo," the stranger snapped, then pressed one palm over his chest as a spasm of coughing shook him.

"An' what," Mitoga demanded, "are yuh doin' in Centerfire?"

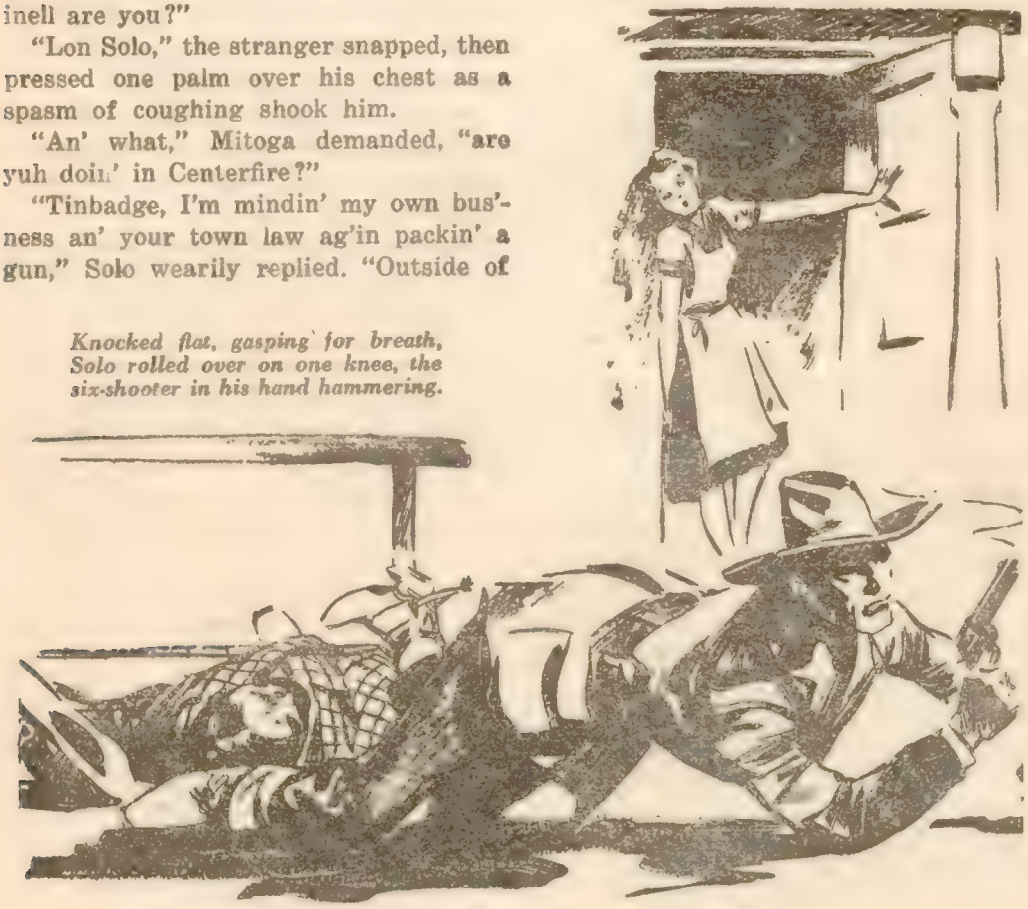
"Tinbadge, I'm mindin' my own bus'ness an' your town law ag'in packin' a gun," Solo wearily replied. "Outside of that, I'm huntin' a job. So go suck an aig an' let me alone, will you?"

"I oughta slap some of the sass outta yuh," Mitoga snarled. "You tail outta Centerfire pronto, or I will. There ain't no jobs here'bouts for grubline strays wearin' yuhr kinda brand."

"Blackie's sort of wrong, Lon Solo." Grinning, a tall young cowman turned from the bar and stepped over to the stove. "Me, I'm Buck Belton, Solo. I own a spread south of town, and I need a man."

"Dammit, Belton," Mitoga squawked, "ain't it bad enough for yuh to rile yuhr neighbors, messin' up the range with prickly wire? Do yuh gotta spur me by hirin' this stray because I told him to hit the trail? Lookit him. He never got that color skin or that cough of his outside of a prison cell."

"If you'd use your eyes more an' your big mouth less," Solo sniffed, "you'd know

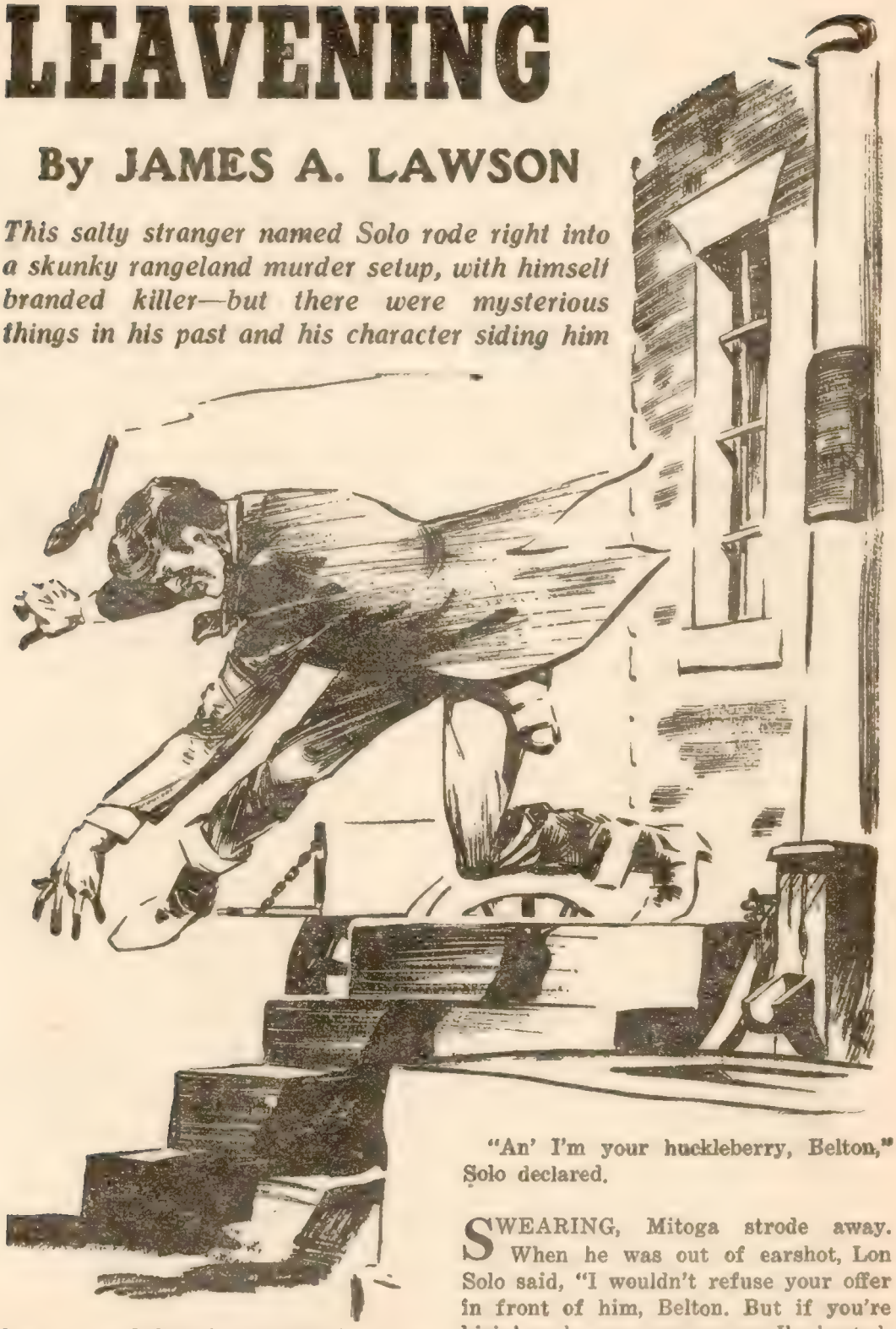


Knocked flat, gasping for breath, Solo rolled over on one knee, the six-shooter in his hand hammering.

LEAVENING

By JAMES A. LAWSON

This salty stranger named Solo rode right into a skunky rangeland murder setup, with himself branded killer—but there were mysterious things in his past and his character siding him



how to read brands right before you started cullin' the human herd."

"I ain't spurring you, Blackie," Belton drawled. "Unless it rowels you that I'm offering Solo a job."

"An' I'm your huckleberry, Belton," Solo declared.

SWEARING, Mitoga strode away. When he was out of earshot, Lon Solo said, "I wouldn't refuse your offer in front of him, Belton. But if you're hirin' me because you can see I'm busted, or if it'll cause trouble between you an' the law, the deal don't hold."

"Oh, you'll earn your pay. And don't let Blackie fret you. He ain't as big

across the britches yet as he hopes to someday be."

Motioning Solo to the bar, Belton ordered drinks, and when they were downed, announced, "You've got to have some duds that'll keep out the cold. I'll buy them and hold it out of your pay."

Solo eyed Belton narrowly. "What kind of a job you got?" he suspiciously demanded. "That lawman mentioned barbwire. You got a fence war on your hands? If you have, just deal me out right now!"

"The wire mentioned," Belton explained, "is a shipment that come for me today. We'll haul it out with us this evening. There's no fight, Solo, so you don't have any call to get spooked away."

"I may be a trifle shy, but I ain't spooky," Solo said. "You see, I've had my paws burnt some, an' when a man who don't know anything about me offers to trust me for chestnuts, I look for the fire."

"I didn't mean I took you to be the spooky kind." Belton grinned. "So let's forget it and go get those henskins."

Leaving the Jingiebob, Belton led the way along Centerfire's cold-encased main street to Luce's Mercantile. Inside, Solo was doubled over with a fit of coughing, then straightened and stood blinking at the girl who came walking up. Smallish as Solo was, this brown-haired, hazel-eyed, trim little person made him feel large in comparison.

"Miss Nola Norris," Belton said, "this's Lon Solo, my new rider. Solo ain't used to the way cold weather comes on so sudden in these parts, and got caught without proper clothes for it."

"I got caught without 'em because I got caught stone broke," Solo stated, grinning mirthlessly.

Laughing as she led the way to tables piled with clothing, Nola Norris said, "I admire your frankness, Lon Solo, and I have an idea we're going to be friends."

"Yeah, I hope so," Solo warily replied, and busied himself hunting for his size in a stack of shirts.

Turning to Buck Belton, Nola told him, "Dad was in town this morning. When he saw that your wire had arrived, he began ranting, and our deputy sheriff picked that time to jingle in and ask me to go to the dance with him Saturday. Disliking Blackie as he does, and being mad, anyhow," Nola chuckled, "Dad really went to town. He warned Blackie that he'd dewlap him if he didn't stay away from me."

While Nola and Belton talked, Solo selected clothes and went into the storeroom to put them on. Coming out, wearing new wool pants and shirt and a blanket-lined coat, he overheard Nola say, "—looks so alone and leary of folks. Go ahead and ask him, Buck."

"Now that you're all dolled up," Belton said when Solo came on up, "you've got some place to go. You see, Alice Carey, the girl I'm going to marry, works in the bank. She and Nola've got a little house together. Saturday, I'm coming in, have dinner with them and go to the dance. I thought it'd be nice for you to come along—and so does Nola."

Lips twisted wryly, Solo considered a moment, then said, "I thank you both, but I reckon I'd better not. I ain't much shucks when it comes to dancin'. I'm sorry, Miss Norris."

"It's quite all right," she frostily assured him.

Picking up the remainder of Solo's purchases, he and Belton went down to the livery barn and wagon yard. While Belton hooked his team to the wagon already loaded with the barbed wire, Solo saddled his pony, led it out of the barn, and tied it to the endgate, climbed to the seat beside Belton, and they rolled away.

THEY were a mile or so out of town and darkness had enveloped them when Belton said, "You ain't lady-shy, are you, Solo?"

"Nope. Just shy of hornin' in on other folkses' bus'ness."

"If you thought that accepting Nola's invitation was horning in on Blackie, you were wrong, Solo. Nola just happened to cotton to you, and she don't give a whoop in hell about Blackie Mitoga."

"Mitoga?" Solo blurted. That's Blackie's last name, huh?"

"Yeah." Solo's interest made Belton wonder. "Why?"

"Oh, just seems like I've heard the name someplace before."

"Maybe you did. Blackie had a brother who, I hear, was killed in a gun-battle in Arizona not long back. Maybe you heard of that?"

"No, I never *heard* of it," Solo grunted in a tone of voice that dismissed the subject.

"Few more miles'll see us home," Belton then said, apropos of the cold. "I allow a hot drink and a warm bunk will go good . . . ."

STEPPING out of his cabin the next morning, Buck Belton called Solo's attention to the new log house on a timbered knoll near by. "I built it for Alice," he said with justifiable pride. "Couple weeks more, and we'll be moving into it."

"I reckon you're lucky," Solo remarked as they went on to the stable and started harnessing the team.

"You bet," Belton agreed. "Three years ago, I made a little money in a cow deal in Montana and was hunting myself a place. I rode by here and stopped overnight. Man and his wife who owned it wanted to sell, and I bought it right out from under Sam Argyle's nose. Argyle's the banker my girl, Alice, works for. Guess I gave poor Argyle a double thumping. He wanted this spread, and he had his eye on Alice. Then I popped up and took both away from him."

When the team was hooked to the wagon and Belton had saddled his horse, Solo climbed up and took the reins and followed Belton across the range toward a file of fence posts that began at a deep wash and dwindled toward a line of distant hills. Now, they came upon bunches of Belton's blooded, Circle Arrow whitefaces, and a few head of scrawny mixed breed cattle wearing the TN brand of Tom Norris, Nola's dad. These, Belton drove onto the range beyond his fence-line, while Solo unloaded fencing tools and a spool of barbed wire near the anchor post at the edge of the wash.

Belton meant to string the first strand of wire plumb across, so they wouldn't have to keep driving TN dogies back while they ran the rest of the wire. As they went to work, Belton griped, "If Tom Norris had cleaned up and sold his run-down, mixed stuff and gone into whitefaces when I did, we wouldn't be doing this. Way it is, Tom's gotten in debt to Argyle, at the bank, but with Nola working in town and helping him, he could've swung it. But Tom's a stubborn old goat, and wouldn't hear to it. So I got to run this damn' fence, which same he threatens to cut, because it'll keep his cattle from drifting to the shelter of the hills when heavy storms set in."

"So there won't be no line trouble, eh?" Solo grunted.

"Not any." Belton shook his head. "Tom just talks big. He'll finally see things my way, I'd bet. But meantime, I've got to keep his scrub stock from mixing with my blooded cattle."

On Saturday then, they finished stringing the first strand, and came back in before noon. When they'd eaten, Belton got out his town clothes and started getting pretty to go to town. He'd just finished shaving when a rider hailed the cabin and then came on in.

"Howdy, sheriff," Belton greeted him. "Lon Solo, this's the sheriff, Lew Jaeger. . . . Kind of cold to be riding for fun, ain't it, sheriff?"

Sheriff Jaeger, a stolid, grizzled man, shrugged and said, "Ain't ridin' for fun. Going to investigate a cuttin' scrape in that sheep settlement over the hills, an' dropped by to see this Solo gent that Blackie Mitoga's sored up about. Blackie says he's an ex-convict, an' that he acted on the peck. Claims that when he told Solo to ride on, you hired him just to be aggrafrettin', Buck."

"You and me are good friends, Lew, and I wouldn't bring you in any trouble," Belton grunted. "Blackie's sore because Solo stood up to him after Blackie'd wagged his big jaw too much, as usual."

"Your word satisfies me, Buck." Jaeger moved toward the door.

"An' I'll add to it that I ain't an ex-convict," Solo said. "I never come by my bleached-out hide an' cough in a prison cell."

Belton nodded. While Solo was taking a sponge bath, Belton had seen the puck-

ered scars where a bullet had gone in near his right breast and out the back. A long stay in bed and a slug-nipped lung would account for Solo's paleness and his cough.

WHEN the sheriff had gone on his way, Solo growled, "Is he scared somebody'll rile his precious deputy, or run him off?"

"Lew Jaeger's just cautious," Belton said pulling his gloves on. "You see, Sam Argyle, the banker, is kind of powerful, and he sort of forced Lew to appoint Blackie Mitoga as deputy. Before that, Mitoga was running a spread Argyle owns, north of Norris's TN. Last election, Blackie ran against Lew Jaeger, but lost out. Lew don't want to miss any bets that'd cost him votes and win same for Blackie, come election time again."

"Argyle wants to own the sheriff as well as the range, eh?"

"Oh, Argyle's just ambitious," Belton said, adding, "Well, take it easy while I'm gone. I'll be back in the morning."

That night, a light, dry snow whipped by a hard north wind, swept the range, but it had stopped by the time Solo finished his breakfast the next morning. Riding out, then, Solo returned later to find a livery rig in the lee of the stable and Nola Norris, Buck Belton, and Alice Carey drinking coffee in the cabin.

"Alice and Nola drove out to hang some curtains in the new house," Belton explained when he'd introduced Solo to his fiancee.

"And I wanted to say I'm sorry for getting mad because you refused to come to the dance." Nola smiled. "Buck said you feared it might cause trouble. Now

Solo held the pitchfork like a javelin. "Claw your iron and I'll jab this right through your gut!"

that you know better, will you sit here beside me and have a cup of coffee?"

"I'd not swear you couldn't cause a man trouble," Solo said, finding it pleasant to be sitting close to her.

Looking across the table at Belton, then, he told him, "I rode the fence. A

few TN dogies had drifted ag'in it, but the one strand was holdin' in all but one place. Down where the fence runs across that coulee, the TN stuff had been choused away. All but one proddy brindle steer that was on the Circle Arrow side just beyond the point where the wire had been cut."

"That stubborn old man of yours, Nola!" Belton laughed. "He got his stuff back from my fence, cut the wire, and run one steer onto my side just to show me he'd keep his word. Now he'll tell it big all around how he defied me, and be satisfied, I'd bet."

Nodding, Nola glanced anxiously at Solo and said, "I hope you didn't ride over after dad, or make any trouble?"

"Me?" Solo's mouth slanted crookedly. "Not none. I wouldn't move a hand to mix in any kind of trouble for somebody else."

"You certainly lean over backward to stay out of even the shadow of trouble, don't you?" Nola eyed Solo narrowly.

"Y'darn right." Nodding, he stared straight back at her. "An' since you've mentioned it, I'll tell you why. I was a *huerfano*, an orphan range stray. I grew up doin' my own fightin' an' providin', an' was ridin' for a two-bit spread down in Arizona when a big cow syndicate decided to crowd in. Savvyin' what was comin', I got the li'l ranches to pool up, an' I stuck with 'em. The syndicate sent in paid killers, an' I killed 'em. When the pool saw I stood between 'em an' the gunnies, they bragged me up big, but I noticed they got to keepin' their womenfolks away from me."

Solo paused, his expression wintery. Then, bitter-voiced, he went on: "The syndicate finally figgered the range wasn't worth the cost, an' pulled in its horns. Then along come a gunsnake who craved to cut a notch for me on account of the rep I'd got. He 'sprised me an' got me through the right lung before I downed him. I spent weeks in bed, an' all the money I'd saved to'ard a place of my own, an' not a damn' one of them whose homes I'd saved—men or women—so much as come to see me. I knew then that I was fine while I was gettin' a killer rep fightin' for 'em, but they didn't want no truck with *me* when I needed help from *them!*"

Getting up from the table, Solo buttoned his coat and stepped to the door before he wound up—"So I left there, drifted, finally landed here, broke, an' still not very healthy. That's why I duck other folkses' fights, even though I person'ly wouldn't take back for the devil hisself. That's why I swore I'd never mess in any trouble that wasn't strictly my own, an' it's a vow I'm keepin'!"

"Oh, Lon Solo," Nola cried, "I'm sorry I said what I did, and I hope you'll forgive me."

"I'd forgive you anything," Solo said as he left the cabin.

THE days following that were cold but clear, and early in the day before Belton's wedding, he and Solo finished with the fence. As he drove the last staple, Belton yelled, "Yiiipppeee! That's all 'til after the hitching and I move my bride into the new manse. After that, Solo, we'll start getting out logs from the hills to build a new barn and corrals. That is, if you're up to it yet."

"Easy work, good grub, an' a warm bunk done lots for me," Solo declared. "I'm about rid of my cough an' my lung's quit hurtin'. I've taken on weight an' I'm gettin' roses in my lily-white cheeks."

"We'll get roses out of bottles, heap grub, and a big blowout after the wedding tomorrow," Belton whooped.

Back at the cabin, Belton got out his town duds. "I'm going in today to help Alice and Nola with some final wedding fixings," he explained. "On the way, I'm going to ride around by Tom Norris's and invite him to be on hand. Now that he's cut my fence and showed me he ain't afraid, maybe he'll be over his mad enough so he'll join the festivities. And you be sure you're there on time tomorrow."

"I'll be along in time for the execution," Solo promised.

It was, however, past time for the wedding to start when Solo reached Centerfire the next day. Leading his pony, which had lamed itself stepping into a frozen

rut several miles from town, he walked past the church to the livery barn on the other side of the street.

Stabling his mount, Solo straightened his clothing, brushed his hat on his sleeve, and started out of the barn. Opening the door, he stepped back when he saw Blackie Mitoga jogging into town from the direction in which Solo had come. Dismounting in front of the church, the deputy stepped into the vestibule and pressed one ear against the door. Looking up and down the empty street, then, he walked back out and stood waiting beside his horse.

Frowning, Solo remained where he was, watching Mitoga. To him, it looked like the lawman wanted to see somebody who was in the church, had heard the ceremony going on and was waiting until it was over. But, Solo wondered, in that case why all the stealth?

Grasping his saddlehorn, Mitoga acted like he'd just ridden up and was dismounting when the church door opened and a group of people started out. Brushing past them, the deputy went inside and Solo, suddenly apprehensive, hurried over after him.

Mitoga, Sheriff Jaeger, Belton and Alice, Nola and a plushy, flat-faced man were grouped away from other curious wedding guests when Solo entered the church. Stopping beside Nola, Solo heard Mitoga mutter, "I sure hate to do this now."

"Do what, Blackie?" the plushy gent, Sam Argyle, demanded, and Solo wondered if he just imagined that the banker and Mitoga swapped glances of triumph. "You hate to do what? What's wrong?"

"Well, Argyle," Mitoga answered, "I rode out to your ranch this mornin', to see about them harses yuh said yuh figgered one of yuhr riders had stole an' hid out. I got no sign of them, so I rode over to see if Tom Norris maybe'd seen somethin'. I—I found Tom layin' in his kitchen, a butcher knife stuck in his heart! An' outside, like the killer'd lost it as he run away, I found this-here blowed up against a bush."

With one hand, Blackie Mitoga produced a blood-stained handkerchief with a Circle Arrow embroidered in one corner. With the other hand, Mitoga whipped his six-gun from the holster, and threw down on Buck Belton, the owner of that brand!

"Buck," Belton's bride of a few minutes moaned. "Oh, no!"

Swaying against Solo, Nola mumbled, "Dad—killed," then put her face against his shoulder and sobbed convulsively. Putting his arms around her, Solo looked up, and his eyes frosted as he met Blackie Mitoga's jealous, murderous glare. . . .

NO time was lost in bringing Buck Belton to trial. Within two weeks, he was on the stand before a jury and his own testimony was damning him. Admitting that he'd ridden to the TN on his way to Centerfire on the eve of his wedding, Belton didn't deny that Tom Norris had still been as mad as a tumblebug robbed of its ball. He admitted that Norris had cussed him off the place, but swore that he'd left the old rancher very much alive. The bloodstained handkerchief, Belton identified as one that Alice had made for him. He claimed he'd lost it, but couldn't remember when or where.

The State called witnesses who reluctantly told how Norris and Belton had jawed about the whitefaces and the fence, and who'd heard Norris tell how he'd cut the wire, Belton had testified that he'd laughed about it, and Solo took the stand and substantiated that. Making an objected-to remark about a saddle tramp's testimony, the prosecution rested its case.

In his summary to the jury, then, the prosecutor claimed that Buck Belton had gone to TN to jump Tom Norris's hump about the fence being cut. There, he'd been cussed out and, in a fit of rage, had stabbed Norris with his own butcher knife. Fleeing the scene of his crime, Belton had, according to the prosecutor, dropped the handkerchief.

The jury, composed mostly of sheepmen and hoemen from west of Centerfire —since most other folks around were good acquaintances or friends of Belton's —arrived at a verdict on the first ballot. They found Belton guilty of first de-

(Continued on page 80)

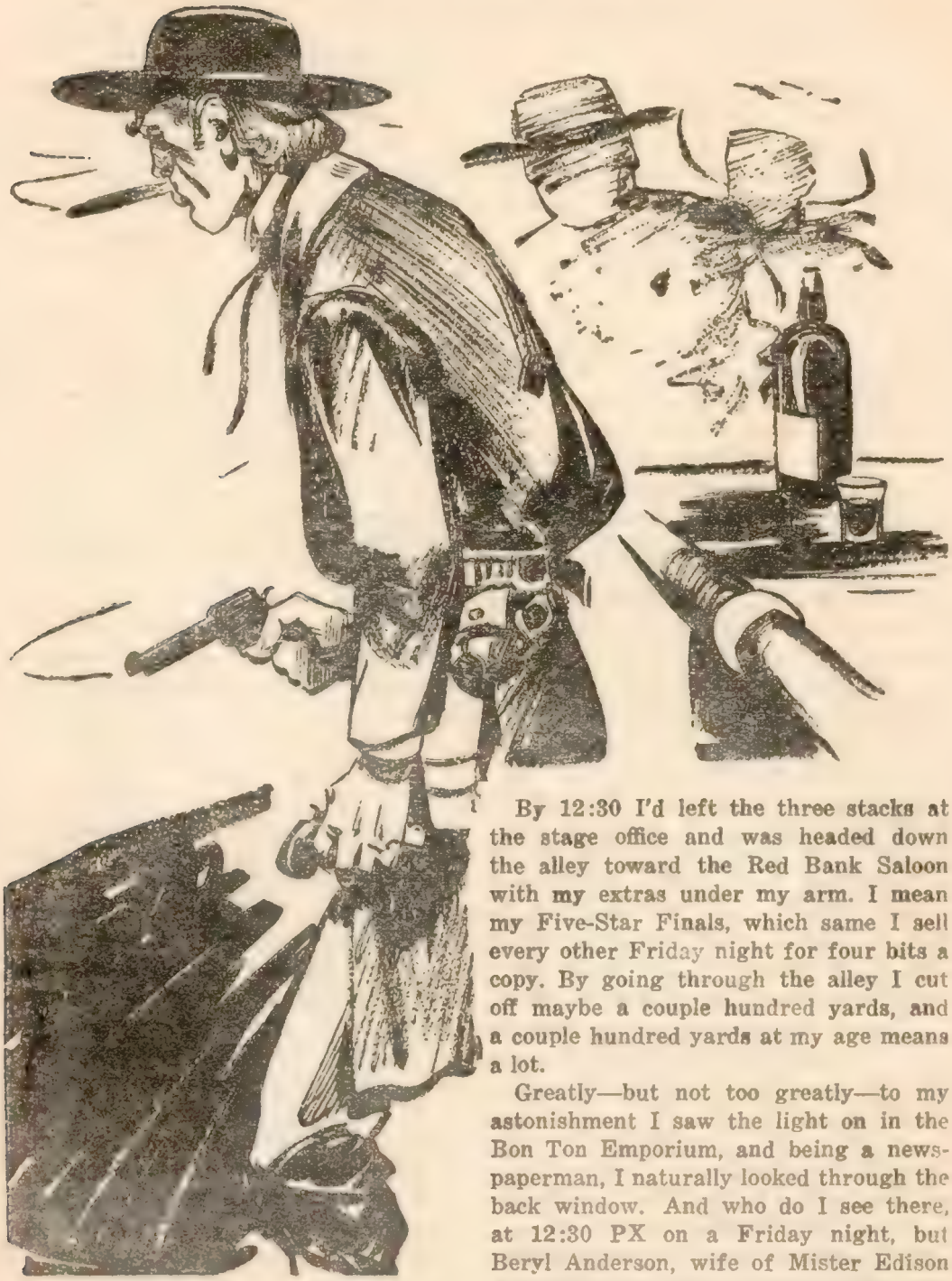
FIVE-STAR FINAL

A cow-country newspaperman gets to see and hear a great many things, including plenty that are distinctly bad for his health or his chances for reaching a ripe old age. But that ornery highwayman and the tough marshal and the Chinese in my town were certainly mixed up in a personal fracas of a sort to top any I'd seen in years of ink-slingin'. And what's more, I got tied into it myself, with skulduggery poppin' around me like guns!

"The same Brickley," she spat at the new marshal. "Damn you, Stiff Shirt wasn't carrying a gun!"

I GOT the paper out at midnight, even though that lowdown tramp printer caught the 10:45 drag through Red Bank and left me, so to speak, holding the sack. Right on the stroke of twelve I picked up an inky rag and wiped the sweat—and the ink—off my forehead and my hands, and started stacking the papers. Whatever else they say about Inky Maddox, I'm a newspaper man, and every other Friday night, regular as the drought and high taxes, the *Red Bank*

By LUKE TERRY



Advertiser is ready, brim jam full of good breezy news items concerning what goes on in our parts of this great State, and usually one or two snappy editorials that set the local citizens back on their heels! Yes, sir, regular as drought and high taxes.

By 12:30 I'd left the three stacks at the stage office and was headed down the alley toward the Red Bank Saloon with my extras under my arm. I mean my Five-Star Finals, which same I sell every other Friday night for four bits a copy. By going through the alley I cut off maybe a couple hundred yards, and a couple hundred yards at my age means a lot.

Greatly—but not too greatly—to my astonishment I saw the light on in the Bon Ton Emporium, and being a newspaperman, I naturally looked through the back window. And who do I see there, at 12:30 PX on a Friday night, but Beryl Anderson, wife of Mister Edison Anderson, our local banker and Shylock.

As everybody knows, the Bon Ton Emporium is owned and operated by Max Morris, one of our foremost citizens, who has a large, impressive wife and three hungry children. Mrs. Beryl Anderson, however, being some thirty years young-

er than her husband, and being a woman of great charm and beauty—as well as spirit and speed—evidently had forgotten not only the wife and children involved, but also her own husband. From what I could see, a sale of silk stockings was in question, for Mrs. Anderson, smiling coyly, had a stocking in her hand and had lifted the skirt she wore above her knees, and was evidently trying on a pair.

I WILL admit that I was enrapt. Mrs. Beryl Anderson is quite a woman, and Max Morris was leaning against a coffee grinder trying to look two ways at once: toward the street with a prayer in his heart that no one was looking, and toward the well-filled silken stocking that already decorated the leg of the banker's wife! It was easy to see she was making some portentous comment concerning the silk hose she was about to purchase.

I never get any breaks. The front door of the store opened and China Sam shuffled in. The skirt dropped like a theater curtain in the second act; Mrs. Anderson smiled at the little Chinese laundryman; and Max wiped his forehead on his black sleeveguard. So I went on, shaking my head. When Edison Anderson brought that woman in from Kansas City, I knew something would happen sooner or later. By golly she'd even made eyes at me—old as I am!

Before I opened the backdoor of the saloon, I heard the hollering and laughing that meant something was up. I suspected it was Tientsin, and I wasn't surprised. Opening up I heard Sue and Liz screaming with laughter, and the gurgle of belly laughs from all the best of the Friday night drinkers, and sure enough, the two Forrest boys, Nathan and Bedford, were putting on a show with Tientsin.

Nathan Forrest had a water glass half full of whiskey and he was saying, "Sit up, Fido, sit up and beg! Sit up!"

Tientsin is an Englishman who drifted into Red Bank a couple of years ago. I reckon he is what they call a remittance man, for once every three months he goes into Edison Anderson's bank and cashes quite a sizable draft on an English Bank. Not that he ever said he was an Englishman. It only due to Anderson that we ever found it out, and he's got Anderson sworn to eternal secrecy concerning his name and the like. Couple of the boys asked him where he was from and when all they could get out of him was the word *Tientsin* they didn't know whether to kiss him or kill him.

Sue, or Suzanne, if you call her what she likes to be called when she's got a couple of drinks in her, having had a bit more education than most of the rannies in these parts, told somebody that Tientsin was a town in China, so the name stuck to the feller.

Tientsin wasn't just a sot and a drunkard. He was the granddaddy of all great drinkers, he was the essence of all the sots in the world. Every three months he got that draft and either Sue or Liz persuaded him to dress up. He'd appear in a pair of brand new clean levis and a pair of cheap boots, a clean white shirt, and a high crowned straw hat. He'd take the money that was left—after Liz, or Sue as the case might be, got theirs—and give it to Hinky Dink, that owned the saloon. Then he would start industriously to work to drink his way through that money. As Tientsin was the best two-handed drinker I ever saw, he usually wore his money out in a week or so, though I remember one chunk lasting him ten days. Hinky Dink let him sleep in the saloon in return for cleaning up, and he managed to cadge a drink here and a drink there, falling away to a mere shadow, but somehow managing to live on until the next draft came through.

He would, I don't need to tell you, do anything in the world for a drink when the drought was on, but he'd been in Red Bank so long the boys usually left him alone—just buying him a bottle every once in a while as a gesture. All except the Forrest boys. They never got tired of him, them two.

THE FORREST boys wasn't really what you'd call bad—they was just mean. Their old gent, Ha! Forrest, had

lost the Flying F a few months previous to this time to Edison Anderson, our banker, and had promptly gone out into his tumbledown barn and hanged himself with a halter. Nobody cared very much—not even the boys except from then on they had to find another place to bed down. So if Hal Forrest was that kind of rancher, you can picture the boys, Nathan and Bedford.

I took in the scene quick, of course. That Tientsin he could put on a show. He was down on his hands and knees woofing and barking around, snapping at Sue and Liz's pretty silk ankles, and pretending every once in a while to catch somebody's levi leg and worry it. What with his face red as a beet and his long handlebar moustache sticking out five or six inches on each side of his beak of a nose, he looked right ridiculous.

Nathan Forrest said, again, "Fido, I'm a-gonna kick the hell out of you, lessen you sit up!"

So Tientsin sat up, his paws dangling loose like, and sort of whined just like a cur dog. And Nathan gave him the whiskey. In a way it was sort of a shame to see the way he trembled and shook as he drained that glass. Matter of fact, the laughter sort of died away. I figured it was time to break it up, so I yelled, "Wuxtra! Wuxtra! Read all about it! John Doe, the Masked Bandit, holds up the Harlandale stage! Wuxtra! Wuxtra! Local citizens import Bad Bill Brickley to corral the bad man John Doe! Wuxtra! Wuxtra!"

We just got a little town, and it always pleases the boys to pretend it's a big city. Me, too. I sold that armful of papers in nothing flat at half a buck a crack. Everybody either bellied the bar or sat down at a table—except the poker players, who was already sitting down, and I hoisted a quick one myself, watching their faces as they read.

Reckon I was the only ranny in the crowd that saw Tientsin. He was standing near the front door with his head hanging and little Wang Toy, China Sam's daughter, was talking to him so low nobody could hear. Very few people knew that Tientsin often went to China Sam's to eat, and I reckon I'm not telling any secrets when I say I'd overheard Sam and Tientsin talking a mile a minute—in Chinese!

Anyway, he went on out with Wang Toy. I remember looking in the bottom of my empty glass and thinking I was getting old, for it seemed only yesterday that Wang Toy was a little squdgy-nosed yellow-faced whelp of six or eight playing in front of her papa's laundry—and here she was already a young lady, nearly growed up. Then Hinky Dink refilled my glass and I got absorbed in my own copy of my own newspaper!

I figured I'd handled the John Doe story pretty well, even though it had happened ten days ago, over in Wild Horse Canyon. This John Doe was our local mystery—a medium-sized gent that rode a medium-sized horse and never lost a chance to make a dishonest penny. He'd robbed everything and everybody in the county at one time or other, and always with the same remark: "If anybody asks what happened to your money, tell 'em John Doe took it!" And our old fat marshal and the posses he organized never picked up his track, let alone found the hairpin himself. Sure, everybody in the county was a suspect at one time or other, from Nathan and Bedford Forrest, to poor Tientsin himself!

Well, sir, what made this issue of the *Advertiser* a little better and a little different, was that it had a *picture!* Right smack dab in the middle of the page was a chalk plate engraving of the stage holdup! And it was good, too, showing Pop Everts, the driver, sort of choking on his chew while he tossed down the strong box, and the masked John Doe looking mean but negligent *but* ready on his dark horse with the three white stockings and white-starred forehead, and that scared-to-death drummer peeping out the window!

SUE tapped me on the shoulder, nearly flooring me with that female perfume of hers, and said, "Inky, you never told me you was an artist! This here is wonderful stuff! Maybe sometime you'd draw my picture!"

Back she stepped, putting a hand on her hip and sort of rolling her eyes over her powdered shoulder and—hell, you know! You know how women like Sue and Liz are always constructed, and me, on account of the liquor I reckon, I said, "Sue, some day I'll do you full length in oil, on a red velvet couch!"

She said, "You old coot! I know what you mean!" And that's what I meant, sure enough!

By that time a crowd had gathered round congratulating me on that drawing, and I just took it all in. Now you got to know—I didn't make that drawing! Tientsin, the drunk, the English blacksheep, had come in a few days previous and bummed me for a chalk block. He brought the finished product back in a couple of days and I paid him two quarts of Old Granddad, that lasted him until noon. He said he was willing to make me a picture every two weeks providing I didn't ever tell who did it—funny guy, Tientsin—but if anybody had have had sense enough to look, they'd noticed it was signed with a couple of little Chinese characters down in the corner!

Suddenly the crowd sort of gave way and there was Edison Anderson, our banker, mad as a wet hen, his *Advertiser* turned to the editorial page. Inside me I grinned.

He grated, "You old coot," that being the second time I'd been called coot in ten minutes! "Just what do you mean printing an editorial like this, about me being under the thumb of my wife?"

Innocent-like, I said, "I don't understand you, *Mister* Anderson. I simply published the letter you received from Bad Bill Brickley offering his services as city marshal and said we all was against it until your wife said she knew this here Brickley from Kansas City!"

That's all I said, too, but that was enough! Everybody in town knew how Beryl Anderson had him wrapped around her little finger—and everybody in town also knew how crazy she was about anything that wore levis and forked a bronc!

Now Sue and Liz started reading it, and then, knowing how the old boy looked in his red flannels, began laughing to beat hell, and the Forrest boys, that hated his guts, took it up, and Edison Anderson, he wadded up his half a buck copy of the *Advertiser* and jumped on it, and turned around and walked toward the door.

The bat-wings flew open and Max Morris came busting in, blood pouring from a cut over his eye. "The marshal, where is the marshal, the law! I'm ruined, wiped out, finished! That John Doe, he busts in and he bats poor China Sam over the head and he side-swipes pore Missus Anderson and he makes me open my box and then he clunks *me!* The marshal! Where is the law!"

On account of me being a newspaper man I am the third party to make the Bon Ton Emporium. I grabbed a handful of copy paper out of my pocket and a stub of a pencil and began looking wise like a tree full of owls and writing, "Now is the time for all good men" and such like on the paper. A man has to do that in the newspaper business.

SURE ENOUGH, China Sam was lying about where I saw him last, near the coffee grinder, the blood slowly oozing from a small cut in the hen-egg-sized lump just below his cue. The japanned box Max used as a safe was lying on the counter wide open—and empty, and Mrs. Beryl Anderson was lying there on the floor.

That John Doe was a public-spirited citizen for knocking her out the way he did! Me and about humpty-nine other guys gave him a silent vote of thanks. I haven't seen a lace trimming like that since the year of the big blizzard when I couldn't get out of Omaha for two weeks.

Edison Anderson, he gave a big shriek—that being his private property, and started jerking skirts down in all directions. She blinked her long lashes and said, "Where am I? Where—oh, Edison!" And wrapped her arms around his neck and began weeping.

That show being over I went across to where they was pouring liquor down China Sam's throat. He sat up, too, and

blinked his black eyes and grinned his blanker grin. He said, "John Dloe, John Dloe," over and over and got up and wobbled out of the store, leaving Max Morris to tell the story. Wasn't no story, not from a news angle, in a way. John Doe walked in with his battered Stetson pulled down and the black silk handkerchief up to his eyes as usual, had busted Sam for being alive and in his immedi-

Wang Toy took Tientsin's hand the way she would have taken a child's, and led him out of the place.

ate way, brushed off Missus Anderson when she opened her cupid's bow mouth to shatter the ozone with a piercing scream, made Max open his box, cracked about John Doe, batted Max for good measure and took to the darkness and, no doubt, his trusty steed waiting without.

The same old story. Except for what Baryl Anderson added. She said he was a blonde, on account of she could see his blue eyes, and she put in one of them extemporaneous touches, saying the ranny stuttered! Not that anybody believed it!

Old Edison Anderson turned and shook his finger at me like it was all my fault. He quavered, "Maddox, you old reprobate, I been trying to hire a real city marshal like Bad Bill Brickley for eight months and you been fighting it! If Brickley was here, his very name would prevent outrages like this!"

Beryl Anderson chimed in, "I'm so glad he's coming! I just know it'll be the end of sin and all things bad in our lovely little village!"

Hell's bells! I said, trying to make it sound grim, "Quit hollering. He's coming tomorrow as well as I can find out! But I'll stick to my editorial preachments!" That word nearly floored them all! "I say one bad man attracts another. Bad men are like gamecocks, they live for killing. And they can't stand a worser reputation than their own. A badman hears of a badder man over in the next state and what happens? He gets all rotgutted up and *pasears* over to see if he's really as bad as folks say, and ten times out of nine the whole thing ends up with guns blazing and four or five innocent bystands wiped out in the brawl. Innocent bystanders! Look at poor China Sam!"

I didn't mention Beryl Anderson on account of everybody knew *she* wasn't innocent.

ME, I got the newshound's instinct, which is the reason I been successfully putting out the *Red Bank Advertiser* for so many years in spite of them drunken tramp printers! I drifted back to Hinky Dink's and, as the poker game had busted up, I bought some lemon soda for Stiff Shirt Dugan who has dealt everything from Pitty Pat to Faro from Nome to Tampico, and I bought a bit of nourishment for myself and got him into a lengthy conversation.

I said, "Stiff Shirt, is it a fact that this Bad Bill Brickley has killed twenty-three men, not counting greasers?"

Stiff Shirt nodded.

"Is he really hell on wheels and can he shoot from both hips and also from a spring holster should occasion demand?"

Stiff Shirt nodded.

Liz put in her two cents' worth. "I remember in Abilene," she said thoughtfully, "how he used to come into the Cozy Corner and not let anybody pay for a thing, not a thing!"

Sue looked up from adjusting a shiny garter and added, "And most of the time he didn't pay for a thing hisself!"

I nodded, having heard that story before, and Stiff Shirt Dugan made the longest speech I have ever heard him make in twenty-two years. He said, "Brickley is a louse!"

Up until then his longest and usual speech was "You lose, pardner."

JOHN DOES are always somebody. John Does have always got a stomach to feed and water, and at times they get a hankering for a roof over their heads and maybe some food cooked on a stove instead of over a smokey *mesquite* fire. So, for eight months, I'd sort of been knocking around over the country looking for a black horse with three white stockings and a star on his forehead. And I will admit that most of the time I ended up in a little cottonwood valley where a squatter named Dale once made a mistake. They buried him there. I ended up there because the two Forrest boys, Nathan and Bedford, tossed their bedrolls inside that cabin after Edison Anderson ran them off their daddy's Flying F.

What did I see but *two* horses, each rein-hitched, cropping away at the lush grass. I will not lie, I will not say I yelled

or hollered, and I will not say I did not recognize *one* of the horses. It was the roan gelding that Beryl Anderson always rode! And strictly from a news angle I felt I owed it to my readers to tiptoe down close to that shack and listen to what I could hear and see what I could see.

Just as I had suspected, the Forrest boys were *not* there. But Beryl was there! She was wearing a short black riding skirt, that showed some of them familiar silk stockings above her short boots and a silk shirt, all open and hanging in the front. She was slapping a riding crop —one of them English bats, they call them!—against her left leg and she was saying, ". . . there's two of them, and so help me if I ever hear of you as much as looking at either of them, let alone . . ."

He laughed. This hairpin looked like a cheap imitation of Wild Bill Hickok to me! He had long, yellow hair, that fell clear to his shoulders. His pants fit him too tight, and they were sort of grey and black striped, and his coat was long and black. Lying on the ramshackle, rickety table was a gunbelt and two pearl-handled six guns and a white Stetson, and after laughing he took a long black stogie out of his mouth in such a way that the diamond on his little finger pretty near blinded me.

He said, "Aw, honey, don't be ridiculous! Me, messing around with babes like that when you're in town?" He flipped the stogie away and held out his arms. I mean Beryl Anderson got off that table in a hurry, and next thing you know he was kissing hell out of her and she was helping him. His hands was white and his fingers long; reminded me somehow of worms creeping in and out of that black material. I didn't wait for more. I beat it back to my pony and took out for town.

But neither Sue nor Liz was out of bed as yet.

WELL, SIR, I didn't say a word to nobody. About five o'clock that night I was taking on a little liquid nourishment and speaking of this and that to Hinky Dink when Tientsin entered. At first we did not know him on account of he was wearing a long black overcoat. Now Tientsin is not a very tall man, and this coat was made for a feller at least six foot six without socks, so you can readily see the coat was dragging the sawdust. And for the first time in months he talked with a voice that didn't run up and down the scale.

He said, "Let me have a whiskey stengah, *if* you please!"

And he laid a five-dollar bill up on the bar. He never asked me to have a drink—not Tientsin, oh no! He nursed his money. And before he drank, he tucked the change away in his overcoat pocket. Sure, we kidded him about the coat but he was serious. He said, "Well, old chappie, the air's a bit wintry lately—I think the ulster will give me comfort." That was all. So we had two mysteries right off—Tientsin's overcoat and Tientsin's five-dollar bill.

A few minutes later Edison Anderson came in for his evening drink and not long after Sue and Liz swirled down the stairs for theirs. The regulars started drifting in. I remember Stiff Shirt was laying out a Klondike game to occupy his mind until business began, and I was idly watching him. For the first time in years I saw an emotion pass over his face when the doors swung open. Even the card he was tossing seemed to stop in midair.

I turned. The imitation Hickok was just inside the door, smoke curling up from his long black stogie, while his black eyes swept the room. He took the stogie from his mouth and flipped the ashes on the floor, the diamond flashing.

He said, "Someone at the hotel told me I could find Mister Edison Anderson here."

His words sounded like drops of water falling in a tin bucket.

Anderson said, "That's me, stranger."

The long-haired hairpin flashed his white teeth, walked in, and I'll swear it was like an alley cat slipping and sliding into the room. He stuck out them long white fingers, said, "I'm Bill Brickley. I

got in about twenty minutes ago—just stopped for a brush off."

Anderson pumped his hand and started crowing, leading him right up to the bar. "Boys," he crowed, "here's the end

We found Wang Toy lying there dead; China Sam was on his knees, wailing.

of John Doe, by God! Now we got Bad Bill Brickley for city marshal. Step up, boys, the drinks is on me!"

Everybody bellied the bar. Me, I was next to Tientsin. He did a funny thing. He let the glass sit in front of him all of ten minutes just looking at the liquor, when Anderson conducted a questioning bee with the great Bill Brickley. Yeah, said the great man modestly, I shot it out with so-and-so at Tombstone, yes, indeed, me and Masterson cleaned out Nevada, yes, yes, it wasn't nothing, killing them four Laverty brothers in the Powder River Country and so on and so on. Next thing you know Brickley said the next one was on him, and egged on by Liz, Hinkey Dink stood right in front of him waiting for his money.

A funnier thing happened then. Tientsin took his liquor and dumped it in the gobloon.

THE REST happened so quick I can't hardly tell you. Right into the mirror the great gunman said, "Stiff Shirt Dugan! You dirty, cheap, thieving card sharp—!"

And *whoom!* He whirled. He didn't use his holstered guns. It was a spring

gun that leapt into his hand and barked, just once. Before Stiff Shirt was flat on the floor, while he was still slumping, Brickley leaped at him like a tiger, and fired twice more, seemingly in mid air. I thought he was stomping a dead body, but when he straightened up he had something short and black and deadly in his left hand. He turned with slitted eyes to the crowd, and he said, "Has anybody else got the same idea? Anybody else in this man's town think they can get Bad Bill Brickley in the back, like this skunk!" It was a little derringer he had in his hand.

"We been enemies for years, me and Dugan, because I'm law and order. How long has he been skinning you poor people?"

Nobody said nothing. To our mind there wasn't a squarer gamboleer than poor Stiff Shirt. Liz was over with him now, and he was bleeding all over her spangled dress.

"The same Brickley," she spat at him. "Damn you! Stiff Shirt hasn't carried a gun in years!"

She should have known.

But Edison Anderson took it up. "Shut up, you," he screeched, "Stiff Shirt beat me for twelve hundred dollars only last night!" Which of course made poor

Dugan deserve death in Anderson's book. "Here," he went on squealing, "I'm mayor of this town, what I say, goes!" And by damn he pinned the marshal's star on Brickley's coat.

Nothing else happened that night. Brickley stood around soaking up free drings. The Forrest brothers bought, little Max Morris bought, everybody bought—but Tientsin. He kept soaking it up and staring in his glass. Once or twice it seemed I saw his shoulders trembling inside his overcoat.

About eleven o'clock Nathan Forrest sighted Tientsin and I reckon he thought he'd show off before the great man. He walked down the bar and snapped his fingers close to Tientsin's big ear. He

said, "Fido!" What do you mean, standing on your hind legs like a man! Get down there on the floor, Fido, where you belong!"

Tientsin looked in his glass, and his face began to redden. He started shaking, and he said in a low voice, "Please, old chappie, please, not tonight!"

Nathan was amazed. In fact everybody was amazed. Bad Bill Brickley was lighting another stogie, and I, personal, saw him hold the match until it burned his fingers.

Nathan slapped at Tientsin and knocked his hat off. Tientsin got even redder. He gulped his liquor down, he started backing away, he put his hands out before him, and he said, "No, no, I say, old boy, don't beat me, I say, don't do it."

Bedford Forrest tripped him and down he went. He curled up in a knot and kept his face covered with his hands. He was a scared, beaten dog, that's all.

Nobody heard her come in on her little velvet slippers. But all at once there she was, Wang Toy, China Sam's kid, leaning over Tientsin, talking to him in Chinese. I don't know what she said, but his hands came down, and you could see his face was tear-streaked.

To Forrest and the rest she said, "Do not harm him. He is very, very ill, please."

He made it to his knees. He got up. She took his hand like she'd take a child's, and led him out.

Nathan Forrest said he'd be damned and Bedford said he would, too.

I was watching Bad Bill Brickley. He threw liquor in his mouth and gulped like it was water. Then his tongue came out to dab at his lips.

He said, "Who's that?"

Anderson said, "The laundryman's kid, name of Wang Toy."

"Kid, hell," said Brickley, "Chinese girls mature early. She must be all of fifteen!"

Guess all of us got to thinking he was right. Matter of fact, she did look like a round little doll, and the little silken-covered leg peeping out of the long, knee high slit in her tight skirt wasn't the leg of a kid. But nobody said nothing else.

I HAVE always figured that a good newshound is more or less of a detective. He had to be in this business. So I moved. For years I had lived in the Acme Hotel, above Palgrave's Hardware. I didn't move from there—I just changed rooms—to the one next to Bad Bill Brickley. After all a man with a newspaper owes it to his public to sort of keep check on things. So I sharpened me up a nail and stuck it through the wall, then pulled it out, leaving a right nice hole, through which I could see, provided Brickley or his company got within range.

He hadn't been in town two days until he had a visitor—and that visitor, so help me was Tientsin. He came up the back way, and when he tapped at the door, damn my eyes, Brickley said, sugar-voiced, "Come in honey."

I heard the door click open, heard Tientsin lean against it, close it. Then Brickley's voice, "Damn you, Masonhall," or something like that, "I told you to stay away from me." Tientsin didn't say a word. But I could hear his shaky breathing.

Brickley said, "Well, long as you're here, you might as well have a drink."

Tientsin said, "I just had one, Brickley. I came up to tell you something. You been asking around about Wang Toy, haven't you? I just wanted to tell you I haven't forgotten Tientsin—I haven't forgotten your little ways there, with children."

"Now wait a minute, friend." Brickley's voice was smooth, placating. "The past is dead and behind me. I didn't mean to tread on your toes. If Wang Toy is your property—maybe we could talk things over."

Seemed like Tientsin's breathing got noisier.

"You're going to need more drinking money," purred Brickley. I'll pay my way. And besides," his voice got mean, "I can bear down if I have to! This country would like to find a bandit named John Doe. What if John Doe turned out to be a drunken Englishman—after the Englishman was dead, of course."

I like to have broke my neck trying to see. But there wasn't no use. I could

hear Tientsin gulping. He got the words out, though. He said, "Damn you, Brickley, I warned you! That's as much as I'll do for you. Don't forget, I haven't forgotten China—and what you did there!"

The door opened, closed, and I could hear his reeling footsteps running down the hall. And Brickley's cursing, and his pacing of the floor for the next twenty minutes. And that night, Tientsin wasn't at Hinkey Dink's at all!

Now, strictly in the interests of journalism, I was also on hand when Beryl Anderson visited Brickley's room. This time they sort of got within my line of vision. Me, not running one of them Town Tattler sheets, I won't go into detail. But I will say this: I went down to the shop and I set me up a front page for the *Advertiser*, leaving off the dateline, of course. Edison Anderson was welcome to pick up my plant anytime—after my first extra in thirty-two years was on the streets. He'd do it, and I wouldn't even mind. On account of the headline on that extra was set, BANKER'S WIFE ELOPES WITH CITY MARSHAL.

Yes, sir, right there in the room next to mine they planned it. It was just a question of time.

I think I knew in my heart that I'd never run that extra, though. I kept waiting for something to happen, setting up my front page with little local items, doing my own work on account of no tramp printers dropped off the Ft. Worth and Rio Grande. And it happened. Reckon we all heard the roar but never having heard a safe blowed none of us knew what it was.

I HEARD the hollering after a bit and rushed downstairs with my paper and pencil stub, and by golly, John Doe had blowed the big round safe in Anderson's bank. How'd we know? On account of we saw the note saying, "Compliments of John Doe."

Well, sir, Anderson like to went crazy. Seems like he'd just got in a shipment of money for one thing or another and had lost around fifty thousand dollars, which same is not silage. Brickley organized posses and rode here and there, and never turned up a thing, not a thing. I reset my front page, and Friday afternoon Tientsin came in with his chalk block. He had the shakes so bad he couldn't hardly walk. I gave him a quart of whiskey and pulled a fast proof on the engraving.

That there cartoon was timely, all right. It showed a masked man crouching before Anderson's safe, sort of turned toward the artist. Right over his ear—I could see this in the first proof—was sort of a crescent-shaped scar. He was masked, of course. And he was saying, in a balloon, "Compliments of John Doe!"

There was a title, too, in big block letters, "How Long Can This Go On?" and it had them same Chinese characters down in the corner like on all of Tientsin's chalk blocks. It tickled me. I gave him a ten-dollar bill besides the second quart, trimmed the block down, and locked it in the middle of the form on the old flatbed press.

Friday night, after midnight, I went through the alley and into the bar yelling my customary, "Wuxtra, wuxtra!" In nothing flat I sold out.

About ten minutes later, back in my room, somebody knocked at the door and I said, "Who's there?"

"Brickley," was the answer. "I want to see Maddox."

So I got up, and dressed and went out into the hall, mad as a yet hen. Brickley had the meanest grin I ever saw on anything less than a coyote. He said, "Old man, your pictures—" he tapped the *Advertiser*, "don't you sometimes think you're a little too artistic?"

I began to bluster. I said, "That ain't my picture, Brickley." And like a scared old fool—which I was, I added, "I buy one every two weeks from Tientsin!"

He dropped me, and held the paper to the lamp light. "Hanh!" he jerked out. "Tientsin couldn't draw flies." He threw the paper down and clumped down the steps. I picked it up and looked closer.

A chalk engraving is a funny thing. Remember, I'd just pulled one proof on the thing before I locked it in the form?

(Continued on page 89)

TEPEE RING

Bill was just topping the side of a wash when that bullet brought a piercing scream from his cowpony.

BILL SMITH held his hat between spread knees and stared at the pine coffin resting on cloth-covered sawhorses in the big main room of the Tepee Ring Ranch house. The air was warm and charged with the odor of camphor. The soothing voice of the minister seemed more of a chant than a service because Bill was thinking about the dead man's past and wondering what sixty years of life had got him.

Phil Greenwood, the deceased, had been one of those rare individuals who, by working from dark until dark for year after year, had created a successful cattle ranch from barren range land, alkali seeps, and a burning ambition.

Three years ago, shortly after Bill had started to work for him, Greenwood's heart had gone bad. Sudden fear had

GUN TALLY

By CHARLES HANDLEY

★ ★ ★

It seemed to cowpoke Bill Smith that the now-deceased manager of the Tepee Ring Ranch had died a little too readily. And Bill's suspicion increased when it turned out the owners were giving him a dust-off for the job in replacement. But when trouble—assorted—and banditry, plain, began to break, then Bill knew that he was in for hot hell—pronto!

★ ★ ★

caused him to sell the place, lock, stock, and barrel to the Tri-State Syndicate. He had gone east for medical aid and had been told that in spite of his heart condition he would likely live a long time if he took things easy.

Unable to relax completely he had returned to operate the Tepee Ring for the Tri-State. Never a man to tolerate red tape, he had been at constant odds with the management over reports and petty detail. Recently the theft of hundreds of head of shipping stock had added to his worries. The doc had kept him going for a time with digitalis, but even that had been a poor weapon against a lifetime accumulation of work habits.

Bill was next in line for the job, and he wondered why he wanted it. It promised little but trouble, red tape, and the enmity of the independent ranchers who felt that the syndicate had come to gobble them up.

The sudden realization that he was thinking about replacing a man who was not yet buried made him force his mind back to the preacher's benediction. He turned his head slightly and frowned at Juan Conchas who was staring at him with owlish eyes. At times like this Juan had an uncanny ability to follow his thoughts. He didn't like it. It made him feel guilty.

At the close of the service Bill helped carry the coffin to the waiting spring wagon.

He shook his head imperceptibly, wondering if Phil Greenwood would have cared about the other five who had voluntarily fallen in as pall bearers.

ACROSS the coffin from him was Jimmie Witherspoon, the round-faced son of one of the owners of the Tri-State, who had been working under Greenwood's supervision for several months. Behind young Witherspoon was one of the Tri-State's top hands, Shorty Long, who was neither short nor long, but had been labeled Shorty because his name was Long. Behind Shorty, his square jaw set to make a straight line of a Hapsburg lower lip, walked Benjamin Landell. Landell's younger brother, Pete, was opposite him, and moon-faced Juan Conchas, as usual, was directly behind Bill.

"Three friends, two enemies," Bill thought. He glanced at Jimmie Witherspoon and mentally added, "An' the boss' son."

As they went for their ponies to follow the improvised hearse, Juan asked, "You theenk ol' man Weetherspoon mak' Jimmie the new boss?"

"That's his business," Bill replied bluntly.

Juan's owl eyes opened wide. "You don' want thees job, Beel? Yon don' theenk Landell tweest the keed aroun' hees sleek finger?"

"I'll leave that kind of thinkin' to Henry Witherspoon. The Tri-State has done pretty well without my say-so an' I reckon they'll continue to get along."

Juan shrugged. "The ol' man he don' know about Landell; the keed he don' know about Landell—"

"We don't know about Landell!" Bill cut in irately. "Lay off that prattle!"

"I bet you seex beets we lose more dam' beef eef Jimmie runs the *rancho.* Maybe-so we go back to Nogales, yes?"

"Maybe you'll remember why you sneaked into Montana in the first place," Bill reminded. "I'm sick of listenin' to your superstitious drivel. What makes you so danged suspicious of everything?"

Juan raised his shoulders and spread his brown hands in front of him. "*Quien sabe?* You say Juan has got eyes like the owl. Maybe-so he see in the dark."

The two mounted and took their places in the procession following the spring wagon to a flat section of range land covered with numerous rings of half-buried rocks. Some time in the past these stones had been used to weight the edges of Indian tepees, and it was here, where the Tepee Ring got its name, that they buried Phil Greenwood.

As soon as the grave was covered, some people started to leave. Others congregated in small groups. Bill, Juan, and Shorty Long were drawn together by mutual interests. Benjamin Landell cornered the Witherspoons and talked to them until the old man looked nervously at his big gold watch and walked over to where Bill was standing. The Landells followed.

"It's about time for my train," Henry Witherspoon told Bill. "Jimmie will ride down with me. You've been running things for Phil, I understand, so you just go on as you were until the Board of Directors' Form 2362 comes through. It's just a formality, you know—a company policy. In the meantime if anything important happens, give me complete details by wire or letter."

"Maybe-so we go weeth them?" Juan whispered encouragingly. "Maybe-so you tell heem something, *amigo?* Thees Form 2362 she's no good for catch Landell."

IGNORING the pointed suggestion, Bill shook hands with the elder Witherspoon and watched him and his son ride off. Bill would have welcomed an opportunity of discussing some things with Henry Witherspoon.

He suspected it was Benjamin Landell who was rustling Tri-State beef, also that Phil Greenwood's sudden death may not have been entirely due to natural causes. He had kept his own counsel because he had no proof and at times he feared his suspicions might be due to the whisperings of Juan Conchas.

Benjamin Landell walked up to Bill and clicked his boot heels together. His sharp eyes glistened with his own particular kind of humor and his heavy lower lip became further distorted in a mock smile.

"My boy," he said, "you have just been on the receiving end of a typical syndicate brush-off. Without saying so, Wither-

spoon led you to believe you are going to take Greenwood's place. Right now he's telling his kid that just as soon as things settle down there'll be a change. 'This is your big chance, Jimmie,' he's sayin', 'but we've got to be diplomatic'."

Bill straightened his six-feet-two and tightened his belt. "Maybe, my buttinsky adviser, I'll have my own way long enough to settle a certain job that Phil Greenwood was workin' on before he, shall we say, died of a heart attack?"

Pete Landell, who had been watching with a silly grin on his dished face, sucked in a deep breath, and spread his feet. His brother, Benjamin, shoved him off balance and sent him sprawling.

Shorty Long stepped between Benjamin Landell and Bill. "We'll call it a draw," he said. "I'll tell you this much, Bill. It's as plain as the nose on your face that you're bein' played for a sucker. That's your business, not mine. But I'm next in line an' I've made up my mind I'm through nursin' beef critters for a danged octopus that's loaded with shirttail relatives. Whether you like him or not, Ben Landell represents the independent owners around here. From now on I'm ridin' for him an' for the independents."

"This is a free country, Shorty," Bill said.

"I intend to help to keep it that way," Shorty retorted. "I'm fed up with waitin' for orders from the home office to see if I can go out back!" Turning, he motioned to the Landells and they followed him toward the horses.

Bill pulled a hand across his neck and wiped the sweat on his shirt. His hands were unsteady as he tried to fashion a cigarette. Juan rolled one and handed it to him.

"How do you feel about it, Juan?" he finally asked.

"*Quien sabe?*" Juan replied. "Eef I theenk, I get sleepy."

A SUDDEN shower dancing with soothing rhythm on the corrugated iron roof of the bunkhouse had coaxed Bill into a troubled nap. Jumbled dreams, symbolic of the events of the day, made him toss and roll.

He was pulling on his levis before he became conscious that Jimmie Witherspoon was talking to him. He ran a hand through his shock of tousled brown hair trying to make sense out of Jimmie's low-voiced words.

"You'll have to come again, Jimmie. I guess I was poundin' my ear pretty hard."

"Let's talk outside." Jimmie's blue eyes scanned the line of bunks meaningly. He was fully dressed with bullhide chaps over his denims and a six-shooter hanging from a filled cartridge belt.

As Bill matched Jimmie's equipment, he wasn't surprised to see Juan swing his thick legs over the edge of his bunk and mechanically start to dress.

Outside, Jimmie said, "They're not losing any time, but, if we teach them a lesson right now, they'll know what to expect in the future."

"Who are 'they,' Jimmie?" Bill asked.

"Come on and I'll show you. You and Juan saddle up and meet me at the house."

On the way to the corral Juan kept muttering to himself.

"You can go back to the hay if you want to," Bill told him.

"*Gracias!* But Jimmie say I go," Juan taunted. "Who ees boss?"

Forcing himself into a dog trot Juan made for the corral and brought out two ponies. He waited until Bill was in the saddle, then mounted and followed close behind.

Jimmie came out of the house, rammed a Winchester into his saddle scabbard, mounted, and led them out across the rolling range land in the direction of the little cattle town of Sun Coulee.

The rain had done little more than settle the alkali dust. The moon, riding high behind islands of scudding clouds, spotted the prairie with patches of faint yellow light.

When they were not more than a mile from the ranch house, Jimmie dropped into a coulee and dismounted, motioning for the others to follow suit. He high-heeled to a point where the coulee forked,

took the left wash, and followed it for several hundred yards. Crawling to the bank he led them toward the other fork.

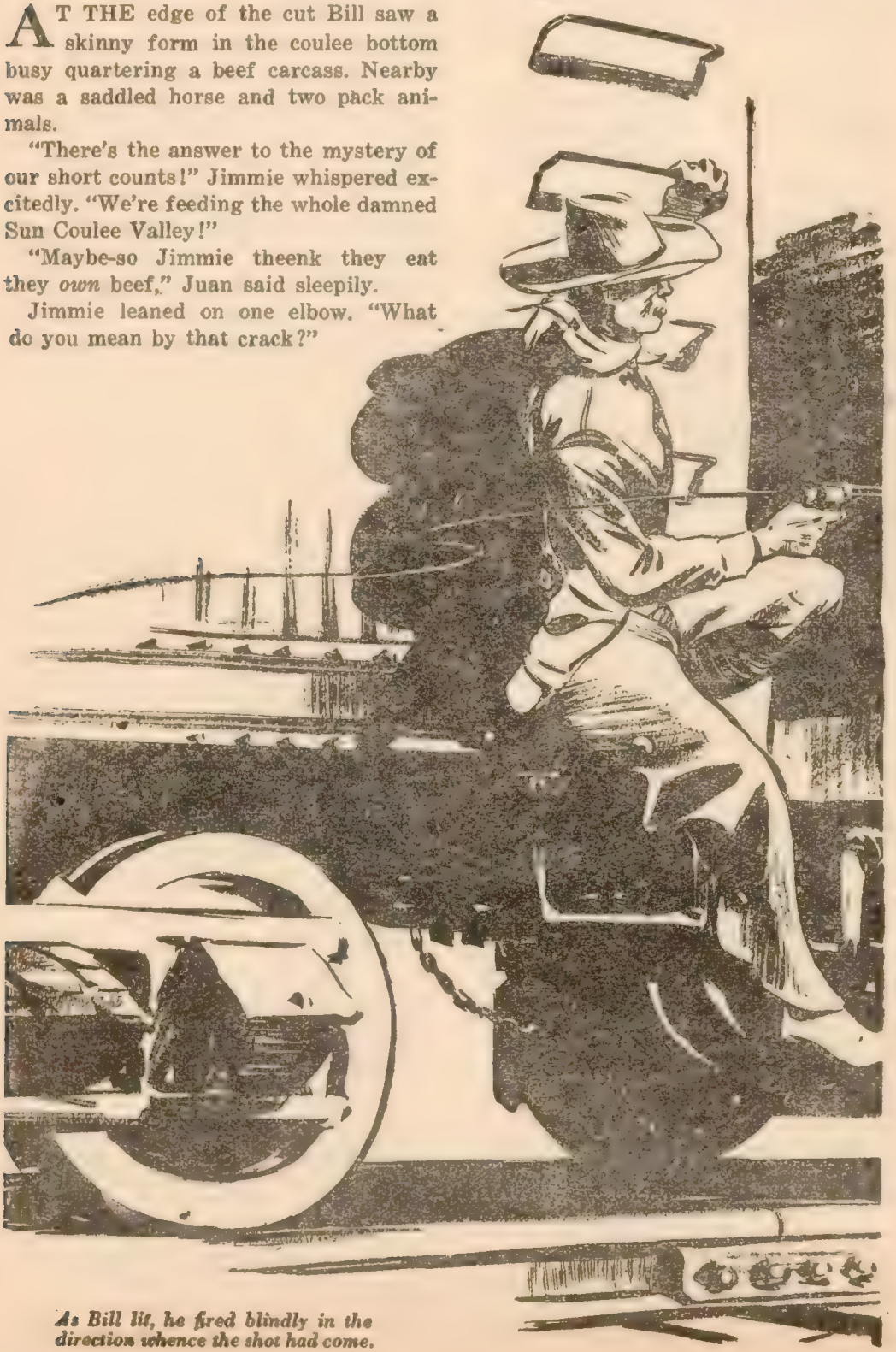
AT THE edge of the cut Bill saw a skinny form in the coulee bottom busy quartering a beef carcass. Nearby was a saddled horse and two pack animals.

"There's the answer to the mystery of our short counts!" Jimmie whispered excitedly. "We're feeding the whole damned Sun Coulee Valley!"

"Maybe-so Jimmie theenk they eat they *own* beef," Juan said sleepily.

Jimmie leaned on one elbow. "What do you mean by that crack?"

"We know this has been goin 'on," Bill whispered patiently. "We decided to ignore it for the time bein'. It don't count



As Bill lit, he fired blindly in the direction whence the shot had come.

for mor'n twelve, fifteen head a month and we've been losin' as high as twenty percent of the gain."

"If you know about it, you should have reported it and asked the home office for a policy. We don't decide those things in the field!"

Raising the rifle Jimmie fired a shot that ricocheted from a rock in the coulee bottom with a sound like a howling tomcat.

The fellow jumped to his feet and started to run. He stopped when a second shot, misdirected because Bill grabbed Jimmie's Winchester, thudded into the bank.

"Stay where you are," Bill warned. "The next one won't miss."

The fellow's teeth were chattering when the three approached. He snuffed in a couple of short breaths, whimpered something unintelligible, then closed his jaws tight and stared at the ground.

Bill glanced at Jimmie to see how he would react to the sudden realization that he had shot at a fifteen-year-old kid. He was gratified at the look of horror the moonlight revealed in Jimmie's glistening eyes.

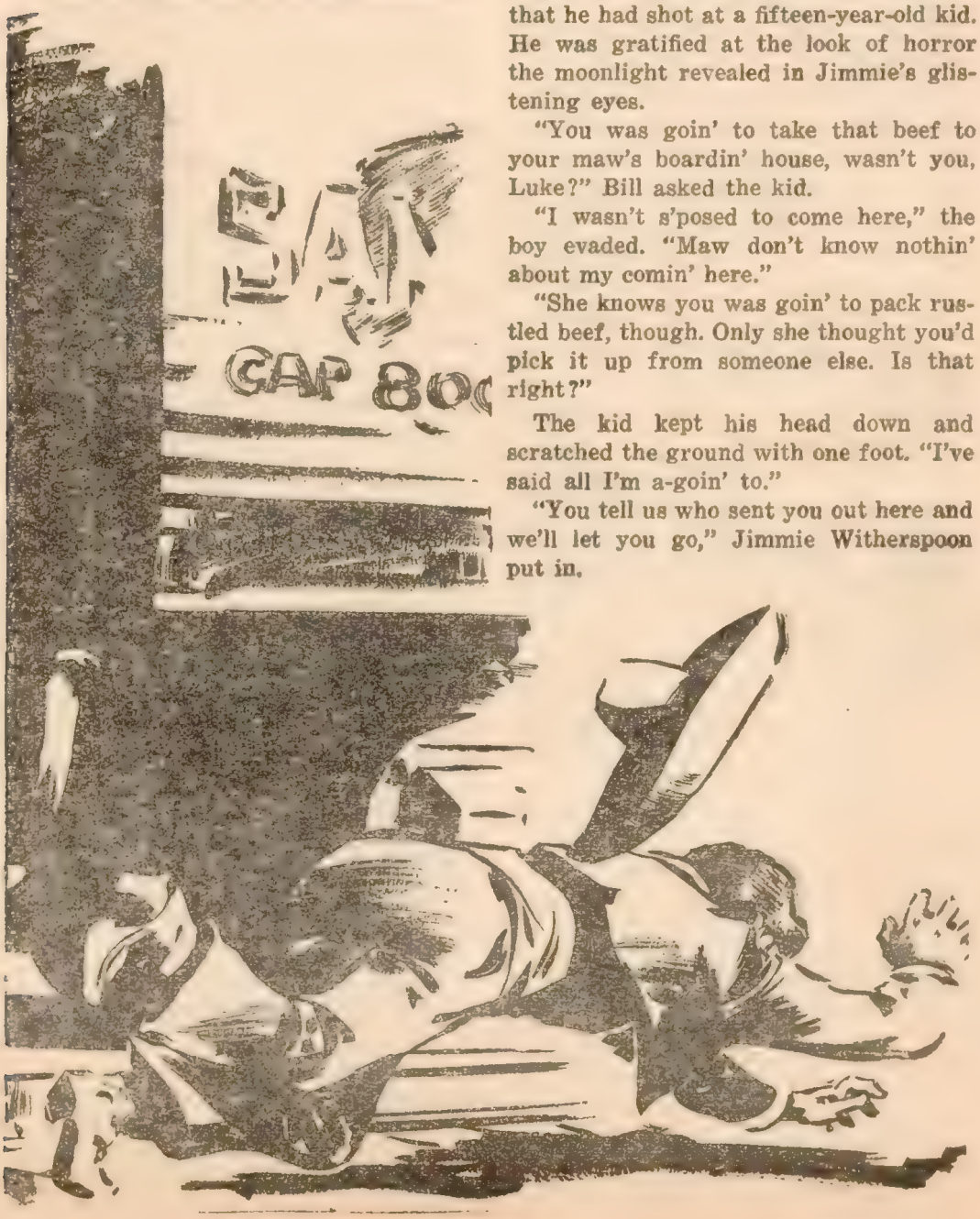
"You was goin' to take that beef to your maw's boardin' house, wasn't you, Luke?" Bill asked the kid.

"I wasn't s'posed to come here," the boy evaded. "Maw don't know nothin' about my comin' here."

"She knows you was goin' to pack rustled beef, though. Only she thought you'd pick it up from someone else. Is that right?"

The kid kept his head down and scratched the ground with one foot. "I've said all I'm a-goin' to."

"You tell us who sent you out here and we'll let you go," Jimmie Witherspoon put in.



"It was the same buzzard that sent you out here, Jimmie," Bill said. "You just missed gettin' caught in what you thought was your own trap by a frog hair."

"I'll do my own deciding whether I was tricked or not," Jimmie retorted. "Right now we've got to determine what we are going to do with that kid."

"Maybe-so you write the home offeece for the complete detail?" Juan questioned solemnly.

Bill walked over and stuck his forefinger under Luke's chin, forcing him to look up.

"You load that beef an' bury the leavin's like you're s'posed to. You take it home an' don't you tell your maw you did anything but what she told you to do. I know who sent you out here an' if you tell him, or anyone else, that you got caught, I'll know about it an' I'll turn you over to the sheriff, savvy?"

"That's like inviting every squatter in the county to help himself to Tepee Ring beef!" Jimmie remonstrated.

"*Bueno!* Maybe-so we fin' out who ees boss?" Juan drawled.

"Right now, I'm boss!" Bill said impatiently. "And I don't intend to be told how to run this ranch by a younker who can't even see through a tinhorn political trick designed to get all of the small owners in the country up in arms against the Tepee Ring. An' I don't give a damn *whose* son he is!"

"I guess I laid myself open to that one," Jimmie replied, lowering his voice to a husky whisper. "Someday I hope to make you eat that last remark." He turned on his heels and climbed out of the gully.

"Maybe-so you feel better now, yes?" Juan asked. "Maybe-so you feel like the boss?"

"I feel like a damned heel!" Bill snapped. "Let's get that kid loaded up an' get out've here!"

BILL hadn't slept much. When he lost his temper, as he had last night, it took several hours of bad dreams to straighten him out.

It was noon before he cleaned up his chores at the ranch and rode up to the red clapboard station in Sun Coulee. He tossed his reins to Juan, which was an unspoken order to stay outside, and went in to see the telegraph operator.

"You almost run out of beef at your boardin' house, John," Bill told the brass-pounder.

John Sample took a pipe out of his mouth and grinned. He was a smallish man with graying hair and a wide, friendly face.

"You wouldn't be begrudgin' a widder woman a little meat, would you, Bill?" he parried.

Bill told him the whole story about catching young Luke with Tepee Ring beef.

"The dirty, low-down, sneakin' son of a buzzard!" Sample exclaimed after Bill had finished.

"Don't think too hard of Jimmie Witherspoon," Bill admonished. "He didn't know he was shootin' at a kid."

"It ain't Witherspoon I'm a-cussin'," Sample replied, "it's Ben Landell an' his whole danged, sneakin' tribe. He rigged up that trick, an' if Luke had been killed, Landell would've been the first one to console Luke's maw an' tell her what crimes was done under the name of a syndicate.

"By the way, I checked Landell's last shipment like you asked me to. It went to the packin' house at Squaw Creek. It cleared brand inspection on both ends of the trip, too. Landell has got an in with the train crews around here, so I made it my business to check from the other end."

Bill shook his head thoughtfully. "I'm confident Landell is gettin' away with plenty of Tepee Ring beef. I've checked both ends from the middle an' I can't find out how he's doin' it. Like as not there's plenty of folks around here who are in the know, but he's got 'em thinkin' the Tri-State is tryin' to gobble 'em up. I can't even depend on my own men."

"Maybe you need a few outsiders."

"An' have 'em around shootin neighbor kids? Nope. I've got to work it out in my own way. Gimme a telegraph blank, John, I'm goin' to find out somethin'."

Bill wrote:

HENRY WITHERSPOON
TRI-STATE CATTLE COMPANY
DENVER COLORADO
NEED FULL CONTROL TO STOP
LOCAL RUSTLING STOP RE-
CALL JIMMIE WITHERSPOON
TEMPORARILY
BILL SMITH

John Sample read the telegram and grinned. "Unless I miss my guess they'll send you a form to fill out. Phil Greenwood used to fire 'em a wire once in a while an' they'd reply, pronto, but he'd just read it, cuss a blue-streak an' tear it up."

OUTSIDE, Bill told Juan about the telegram. "You were right, Juan. Landell will twist Jimmie around his finger an' block us in every set-up we make for him.

"I want you to ride to the east line of Landell's place an' start combing the coulees for Tepee Ring critters. Keep out of sight if you can, but if they catch you, just tell 'em you got separated from me an' you understand I was headin' for Landell's. I'll start at the west line an' ride east. If the Tepee Ring beef we find is mostly shippin' stock, we'll know he's ready for another shipment."

Juan shrugged. "We don't go veree far. Pete Landell ees watch. I see heem in fron' of the saloon. Now he ees in back. Pretty soon he ees in fron' again."

"All right, you ride toward home an' out around. I'll take care of Pete."

Bill waited until Juan was out of sight, then hit out in the direction of Landell's Box L ranch. Beyond the first rise he stopped and waited until he heard the clop-clop of the following cayuse.

Near the Box L and Tepee Ring line he spotted plenty of Tepee Ring beef. There was nothing unusual about it at first sight because the herds were bound to intermingle, but he didn't find a single head of Tepee Ring shipping stock in the lot. He reasoned that Landell had been hazing Tepee Ring prime stuff toward the east end of his property and that Juan might come back with some interesting information.

Working his way deeper into Landell territory he saw that the number of Tepee Ring critters was diminishing, which was as it should be, but still there were no Tepee Ring shippers.

He dropped into a wash and was just topping the opposite side when a bullet brought a piercing scream from his cow pony. The animal reared, went over backward. Bill kicked free from stirrups, landed on the slope, missed his footing, and rolled to the rocky bottom. He had a flash sensation as though he had been hit in the head with a sledgehammer, then he passed out.

WHEN he regained consciousness, he realized vaguely that he was at the Box L ranch house. He closed his eyes quickly against the increased pain in his head caused by the light. He didn't know what had happened or where he had been. By the time his memory returned he was conscious enough to remain quiet and listen.

Shorty Long was speaking. "There wasn't s'posed to be any of this kind of stuff, Ben."

"You know the orders I give the men," Benjamin Landell replied easily. "Pete said he saw Jimmie Witherspoon fire that shot, an' I believe he told the truth. Witherspoon's old man got where he is by murderin' an' robbin'. Jimmie is a chip off the old block. He figured that Bill Smith was competition an' he decided to get rid of him in a way that would cause us trouble, only he didn't shoot straight enough."

"Hell, even I wouldn't fall for that one! What are we goin' to tell Bill?"

"Tell him nothin'. He's goin' to figure some one of us did it no matter what we say. When he comes to, give him a shot of this whisky. I'll ride over to the Tepee Ring an' tell someone to come over for him. He likely won't do any more nosin' around for a few days."

Bill waited until he heard the sounds of Benjamin Landell's pony, then he opened his eyes and looked at Shorty Long.

Shorty squirmed under his gaze. "You got a bad bump on the head, Bill.

We don't know exactly what happened. We found you out cold. Here, take a shot of this soothin' syrup."

The whiskey tasted queer, but the effect was what Bill needed and he took a swig. He shoved the glass aside when he suddenly remembered that Landell had told Shorty to give it to him. In a few moments, by the time he was sure he had been doped, his muscles would not obey his mind and he lost consciousness again.

JUAN was in and out of the bunk house every few minutes the following morning. He was more sleepy-eyed than usual, otherwise there was no outward indication that he had been away all night.

In spite of a splitting headache, which reminded him of yesterday's trouble, Bill was amused. He knew that Juan's big head was bursting with what he considered to be vital information and that he would keep methodically plodding in and out of the place until he found the opportunity for private conversation.

When the opportunity did occur, he told Bill he had located a couple of hundred head of Tepee Ring shippers near the Box L east line. Later, he had trailed a herd of Box L stuff to the shipping pens at Sun Coulee, but there was no Tepee Ring stuff with them. He concluded that Landell had been scared out this time. He finished his report by handing Bill a wire he had picked up in town.

"Maybe-so we can see who ees boss?" Juan asked curiously.

Bill read the telegram to Juan:

BILL SMITH
TEPEE RING RANCH
SUN COULEE MONTANA
WIRE COMPLETE DETAILS
HENRY WITHERSPOON

"Por dios!" Juan puckered his heavy lips. "Maybe-so Landell geeve you thees detail; maybe-so you get eet yourself so Jimmie can take over the *rancho;* maybe-so we go back to Nogales?"

Bill swung his long legs over the edge of the bunk. "Maybe-so you give me an idea, Juan. Landell would feel more confident if Jimmie did take over the ranch. He'd figure he had a bull by the tail on a down-hill pull. We're goin' to pack our warbags, sack our kaks, an' tonight we'll be on the train headin' for—"

"Plenty trouble," Juan interrupted sorrowfully.

Shortly after dark that night Bill learned from the station agent that a representative from the cattle association had secretly checked the train and that all brands were in order. In spite of the information Bill and Juan swung between two cars in the middle of the train just as the wheels started to roll. When the cattle train was well under way, they climbed to a car roof and lay flat, their heads toward the caboose to avoid a stream of cinders from the engine.

The tracks ran parallel with the north line of the Box L, and, shortly after they passed the east boundary of Benjamin Landell's ranch, the train reduced speed and came to a grinding stop.

BILL squirmed sidewise and watched men pile out of the caboose and head toward the center of the train. Two men rode out of the shadows and Bill recognized them as Benjamin and Pete Landell. Behind them an odd-appearing contraption, which turned out to be a portable loading chute, was pulled into place alongside one of the cars by a team of cayuses.

"Maybe-so Landell steal hees own beef," Juan whispered.

Bill grabbed Juan's arm for silence and watched while Box L critters were unloaded from several cars and hazed off into the darkness. Before long another stream of cattle was pushed up to the train and loaded.

"I bet seex beets eet's Tepee Ring stuff!" Juan blurted. "How you s'pose they check out at other en'. Maybe-so thees Board of Directors from 2362 tell you about eet?"

"We won't find out anything unless you keep your mouth shut," Bill replied.

When the bawling of the cattle had died down, Bill heard men moving along the train out of his line of vision. Doors

squealed as men slid inside the cars to jerk the tails of downed critters.

"All right, you! Come down off there! This is as far as you ride!"

Bill tensed at the sound of Benjamin Landell's abrupt command. He kicked at Juan to keep him quiet. They were lying on the off slope of the car roof from Landell, and Bill couldn't figure how they had been located unless someone had climbed to the top of a car and spotted them.

He turned his head and stared up the line of cars toward the engine. Crouched on hands and knees three cars up he saw the dark figure of a man. Lifting his forty-five to firing position he awaited the fellow's next move. It came when a six-shooter cracked from below. The crouched form collapsed and rolled off the car.

"A damned range dick!" Bill heard Benjamin Landell say. "Good work, Shorty."

Shorty Long's voice was husky. "What do you mean by that remark? I didn't kill him!"

"Nobody will say you did unless we get into trouble about it," Landell replied meaningly. "It's just a suggestion for you to think over. I always like to have some little reminder for my men—just in case. Me an' Pete are ridin' as far as Squaw Creek with you fellows. The other boys can handle this end."

There was a promise of dawn on the murky horizon when the train pulled alongside the cattle pens outside Squaw Creek. The shipment was headed further east and Bill reasoned they didn't need to unload for water and feed yet, but it looked like preparations were being made for it. The true reason began to dawn on him when he saw that only the cars containing Tepee Ring beef were being unloaded.

"They'll fill them cars with Box L critters from the shipment they made to the packin' house here last week," Bill told Juan, "then this packin' house will butcher the Tepee Ring stuff. It's as simple as a card trick once you know how it's done."

"Maybe-so you fin' out from Henry Weetherspoon w'at we do now?" Juan questioned solemnly. "She's getting light."

"We'll fin' out from *Benjamin Landell* w'at he do now," Bill mimicked. "Get your fat belly off this car an' be careful about it."

Juan crawled to one end of the car and started to get down. His hand hold missed on the iron ladder rung and he was forced to jump for it.

CURSING his luck, Bill scrambled after Juan, who was sprawled on the ground between the train and the loading pens.

"Hey, you!"

The startled exclamation was followed by a slug that whistled past Bill's head as he lit on the ground. He fired blindly in the direction from where the shot had come.

"Crawl beyond that loadin' chute!" he warned Juan.

Bullets began to cut a pattern around them by the time they reached the temporary safety of the loading chute. Bill stared along the pole fence toward the rear of the train. Men piled out of the caboose and started toward them.

Urging Juan to hurry, Bill crawled under a car to the opposite side of the train. He heard Benjamin Landell yelling orders for the men to cover his move. He ran several car lengths toward the rear of the train, grabbed a ladder, and made the top again, his progress being impeded by Juan who wasn't built for speed. At the last cattle car they swung over the end and landed on the forward platform of the caboose.

Bill pulled the coupling pin that held the caboose to the train. The car moved slowly down the track and they were in the open, clear of the loading pens, when it rolled to a stop.

Slugs plopped into the red boards, broke the windows in the cupola, *whanged* off the iron work. Bill kept shifting position attempting to spot either of the Landells, but the whole outfit at the train kept under cover.

"Dam' sleek," Juan said. "We get away pretty sleek. For a minute I theenk we go to Nogales, dam' queek!"

"It don't look good to me," Bill replied. "The train's backin' up."

The firing stopped and Bill kept Juan toward the rear end of the caboose where they would rave the best chance to fight it out in case the men on the train swarmed off when it reached them.

When the rear car of the train made contact with the caboose, Bill warned Juan to watch his side and shoot at anything that moved.

"Listen, Smith!" Benjamin Landell's voice sounded from between two cars. "You got your nose hooked into somethin' that you can't handle. You can either be a dead hero tryin' to make a soft bed for Jimmie Witherspoon, or you can come out of there an' talk sense. You got to have a relative to get anywhere with a syndicate, but brains pay off in my business. How about it?"

"Right now I'm workin' up a report," Bill fired back. "You hang in the last paragraph, Landell, an' ain't good at makin' changes."

Landell laughed. "I was just sparrin' for time any way. Take it away, boys."

The train jerked to a start and carried the caboose with it. Somebody had crawled under and replaced the coupling pin.

"They're goin' to pull us alongside the loadin' pens where they can board us," Bill told Juan. "When we get close enough, I'll jump an' you follow, savvy?"

"*Adios*, Nogales," Juan said sorrowfully. "Eet ees hotter where we go, yes?"

The crooked engineer gave it all he had, but the distance was too short to get up speed before the caboose was even with the loading pens. Bill jumped and started firing up the line of cars as a cover for Juan. He ran along the peeled pole fence, turned a corner, and stopped. Juan puffed up beside him.

"We'll meet 'em here," Bill said. "They'll be comin' from both directions an' maybe from over the fence, too. You better stay awake this time. There are some riders from the packin' house comin' across there, too."

"I theenk I sleep, all right," Juan moaned prophetically.

BILL shot at Pete Landell when he scurried around the corner. The fellow pitched headlong. Rifle bullets pierced the pine poles as others fired from the opposite side. Bill jumped and cursed when a slug splintered a pole and burned along his side. He peered through an aperture between two poles and glimpsed Benjamin Landell, who had dropped into one of the corrals and was following the wall.

Throwing caution aside, Bill climbed the fence, jumped into the same corral, and crouched within a hundred feet of Landell.

Landell grinned confidently and shot before Bill had gained his balance.

The bullet knocked the breath from Bill, his hip gave way and he went down. He fired from his knees and saw Landell spin around.

Both men arose and staggered toward each other. Landell held out his gunhand as though to shoot again, but the hand was empty. Bill grabbed him and pulled him to the ground.

"I got enough," Landell whispered. "I got enough, I tell you!" As he spoke, he tried to bring a knee against Bill's groin, but there was no force to the blow. Suddenly his mouth opened and he was dead.

Bill held the limp form on top of him until he could get his bearings. He saw Shorty Long drop into the corral and winced at the thought of having to fight it out with the fellow who had been his friend.

"I brought the sheriff, Bill!" Shorty yelled.

Through the cracks between the poles Bill saw men lined up in front of the posse he had mistaken for the packing-house gang. He got to his feet and limped over to the fence. Shorty Long helped him over.

The sheriff, a tall Missourian with black eyes and a sober face, took his pocket knife and cut a slit in Bill's levis where the blood showed.

"You could stand a little repairin'," he drawled. "I got orders to hold you, but we've another chore right now. I'll see you in town."

"YOU sure this drink ain't doped?" Bill's features twisted wryly when Shorty handed him a drink in the sheriff's office.

"That doped likker I give you was what put me wise," Shorty replied seriously. "I got Pete Landell good an' high that night an' he admitted his brother fed Phil Greenwood an overdose of digitalis in a drink. Greenwood found out about the train crew bein' on Landell's payroll an' he had been workin' on the railroad company to do somethin' about it."

"What was the line the sheriff was pullin' this mornin' about havin' orders to hold me?"

"He's been checkin' on that. He's comin' down the street now. Jimmie Witherspoon wired every sheriff in the state to hold you in case you showed up."

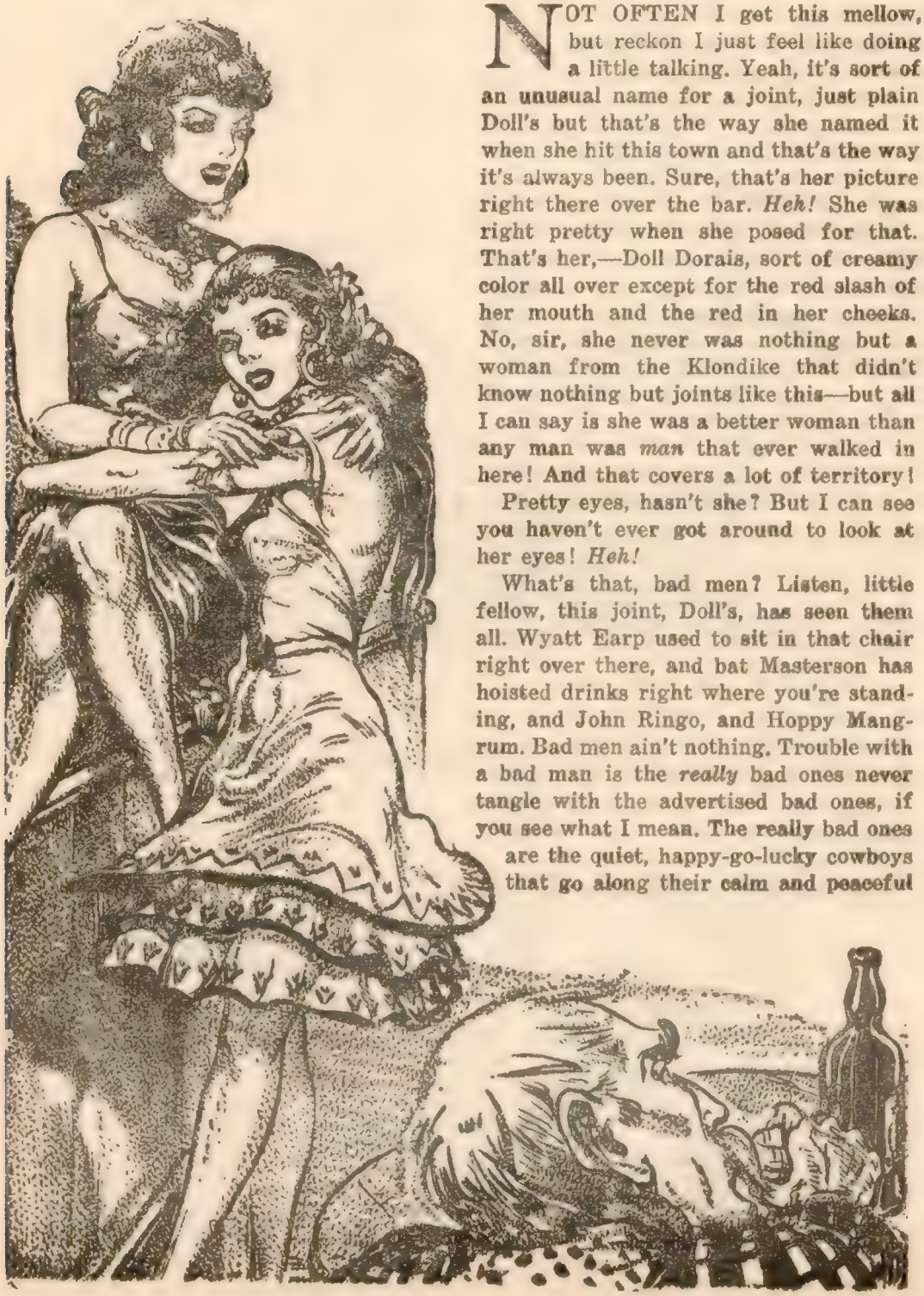
The sheriff came in and tossed Bill two wires. Bill read them aloud:

BILL SMITH
SQUAW CREEK MONTANA
FORM 2362 CAME THROUGH STOP YOU'RE NOW MANAGER OF THE TEPEE RING STOP COME BACK YOU LUG.
JIMMIE WITHERSPOON

The second, which was relayed through Sun Coulee, was shorter:

BILL SMITH
SUN COULEE MONTANA
STILL WAITING REPLY MY WIRE STOP GIVE COMPLETE DETAILS
HENRY WITHERSPOON

Yes, this gent named Hoppy Mangrum was a plumb peculiar galoot. And this lady named Doll! There was a woman who could mow 'em down and leave 'em achin'! Those two made that rangeland come to life and thunder into clashes of a kind to make the grizzlies and the gunmen hightail!



NOT OFTEN I get this mellow, but reckon I just feel like doing a little talking. Yeah, it's sort of an unusual name for a joint, just plain Doll's but that's the way she named it when she hit this town and that's the way it's always been. Sure, that's her picture right there over the bar. *Heh!* She was right pretty when she posed for that. That's her,—Doll Dorais, sort of creamy color all over except for the red slash of her mouth and the red in her cheeks. No, sir, she never was nothing but a woman from the Klondike that didn't know nothing but joints like this—but all I can say is she was a better woman than any man was *man* that ever walked in here! And that covers a lot of territory!

Pretty eyes, hasn't she? But I can see you haven't ever got around to look at her eyes! *Heh!*

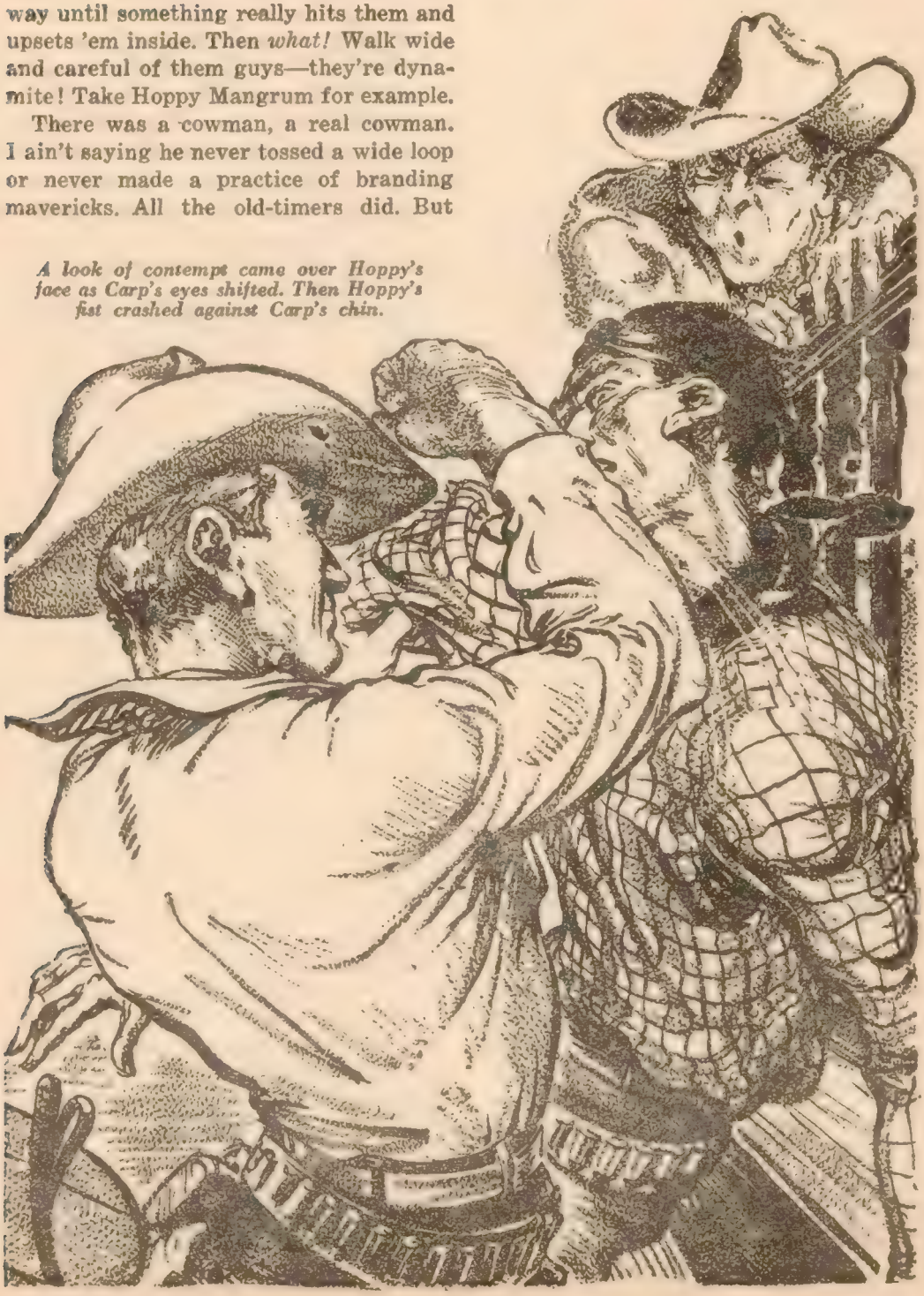
What's that, bad men? Listen, little fellow, this joint, Doll's, has seen them all. Wyatt Earp used to sit in that chair right over there, and bat Masterson has hoisted drinks right where you're standing, and John Ringo, and Hoppy Mangrum. Bad men ain't nothing. Trouble with a bad man is the *really* bad ones never tangle with the advertised bad ones, if you see what I mean. The really bad ones are the quiet, happy-go-lucky cowboys that go along their calm and peaceful

REALLY BAD

By WALLACE KAYTON

way until something really hits them and upsets 'em inside. Then *what!* Walk wide and careful of them guys—they're dynamite! Take Hoppy Mangrum for example.

There was a cowman, a real cowman. I ain't saying he never tossed a wide loop or never made a practice of branding mavericks. All the old-timers did. But



A look of contempt came over Hoppy's face as Carp's eyes shifted. Then Hoppy's fist crashed against Carp's chin.

Hoppy came in here from nobody knows where and, starting from scratch, in just a few years' time had the next-best spread in three states. Fact is, he was pushing the Pikes. You know, the Black Pikes, Joey and Johnny and Dusty. He used to come in here on payday nights with his boys and he'd whoop and holler at the door, and for the next half hour nobody could pay for a drink but Hoppy Mangrum.

AND HOPPY never had an eye for anyone else but Doll herself—that is, among the girls. She'd hear him whooping and she'd come out and stand right there at the head of them steps, those pretty eyes flashing, and Hoppy would run to the foot of the steps, and she'd call, "Romeo, Romeo, wherefor art thou, Romeo?"

And Hoppy, laughing to beat hell, would answer, "Never mind Romeo, Doll, here's Hoppy!"

She'd come five or six steps down the stairs toward his outstretched arms, and then she'd shriek, prettylike, and jump. Every ranny in the room would cheer—except maybe Carp Earnshaw—while Hoppy caught her, kissed the heck out of her, and walked to the bar toting her in his arms.

Later on Hoppy would be sitting in the poker game, with Doll right behind him to bring him luck.

I said everyone enjoyed it but Carp Earnshaw. Carp came by his name honest—he looked like a carp! Carp was a killer—there was no doubt about that. He was on the Pikes' payroll, but nobody ever heard of him doing any work. He was a handy man to have around in case a squatter decided to settle on the Pike range, or in case one of the Pikes had an argument with somebody or other. Nearly all the old-time spreads had a gunman on the payroll. But Hoppy Mangrum didn't. Guess he figured he could take care of his own trouble.

Now mind you, Doll never gave Carp no encouragement. It was just that she was the kind of woman who looks attractive to every man, and Carp, being the sort of guy he was, hated Hoppy. When Hoppy would swirl her up on the bar, maybe she wasn't as careful as she should have been, and me, from this side of the bar, I could watch Carp's face. He'd eye her fine features and his face would go taut and his tongue flick out at his lips and he'd throw down whiskey like water.

Might have been him and Hoppy would have finally showed down about Doll—except it came up first about a name Carp called Hoppy one night when Carp was drunk, mean drunk.

Hoppy was brown as a saddle from range riding, but I'll never forget his jaw muscles—white and as big as walnuts—and his eyes! Don't listen to the stories about a killer's eyes being slots! No, sir! Hoppy Mangrum was a killer right at the moment, and his eyes was wider than any human eyes I ever saw, and there was fire flashing out of them. And his mouth—well, it was twisted in a grin, thin and *purplish*, so help me!

He said, soft and low, "Come closer, Carp, so you can aim straight. And when you get ready, *reach!*"

There was death walking on cat feet, I tell you, when Carp came forward. One step, two steps—three—four—five! Not a sound in the joint—even the Doll had froze and shut up. There was Hoppy, his thumbs in his belt and there came Carp toward him, one hand hovering over the Colt at his right hip.

Three steps away from Hoppy, he stopped. His cold blue eyes stared at Hoppy like a caught fish. You could have counted ten while he stood there staring—and then he began to go slack. Yep, Carp sort of sagged, drooped in the middle. It was Hoppy that took the two or three steps. A look of contempt came over Hoppy's face as Carp's eyes shifted. He drew back his fist and crashed it against Carp's chin. He picked him up and hit him again in the same spot with the same hand!

YEP, that was that. Except a week later Carp went to Hoppy and told him thanks: Carp said he really had had it coming and realized it—which same,

you might say, is what you might call an anticlimax!

I never mentioned Hoppy's kid, did I? I'm sure getting old. Fact is, we all knew he had a kid about twelve years old going to one of them there military schools back East in Nebrasky learning to be a soldier. I got to tell you about Bubba Mangrum on account of *he* is the badman I been holding in mind, the bad man I'm going to talk to you about a little later on. Reckon I failed to mention him on account of up to the time I've got to in my story none of us had ever seen him.

Then Marie Pike came home from a year or so she'd spent back East farther than Nebrasky. The Pike boys was all dark people, which is how they got their name, the Black Pikes, and when Marie went away from here her hair was black as the underside of a crow's wing, to sort of match her eyes. But when the stage pulled up before Durham's store and she got out, wearing one of them dinky little hats, I reckon every ranny in seeing distance gulped and stared and shook his head in disbelief. She had the first head of platinum hair ever to hit Cochise County.

Hoppy Mangrum was there. I mean at Durham's store. And he gulped just as hard and stared just as hard as the rest of us. That was payday night, too, and for once he didn't come into Doll's saloon ripping and roaring. He just eased in gentle-like and sat down at a table. After while Doll came downstairs with a troubled look on her face and went over to him. I took them a bottle of Old Overholt and a pair of drinking glasses, and she had her arm around his shoulders and was saying, "You fool! You poor cow-critter fool! Damn you, haven't I *always* told you you never owed me a dime or a thought? Hasn't it always been that way, Hoppy?"

I got away from there, thinking just one thing—that "always" is a long long time.

So I guess he figured she was right—that he didn't owe her anything. For in three month's time he married Marie Pike.

IN SOME WAYS, Doll Dorais was like a man. Don't you get the wrong idea, mister, just take a look at that there picture over the bar. Like the drummer said a few days ago, "Ain't that the most luscious bit of femininity a man ever feasted his eyes on!" What I mean is she'd knocked around so long in this here business that she thought and felt and sometimes acted like an *hombre* instead of a *mujer*. She stayed upstairs exactly ten days in her room seeing no one but me, old Lockjaw Simmons, and consuming more liquor than most men could jump around in twenty days.

Funny part is, she never cried once. But the way she used to talk! Me, I'd been around her so long I reckon she looked on me as sort of neuter gender. I'd go in with a fresh bottle and there she'd be, walking the floor, with that pretty little red-silk kimono she always wore hanging negligent-like around her shoulders. Back and forth she'd go, from window to door, from door to window, cigarette smoke hanging around her pretty head, talking a mile a minute.

"I'll live, I'll live," she'd grate. "Women like me live forever. She's the girl he wanted and that's where I sent him. It won't work for them; of course it won't work—but what could I do, Lockjaw?"

Me, I said nothing. I just went *tch-tch* and shut up.

"That witch!" she'd scream, and whang the table with her fist, her rings sparkling. "A Black Pike, and he goes for her! There's something dirty and worm-eaten in the whole Pike family, I tell you; but if I'd have tried to stop him, he'd have hated me. Lockjaw! For fifteen years I've known him, do you hear? I could have married him!" *Wham*, went the fist. I've seen him and heard him begging me to marry him! And I refused, because I know what I am and what I'll always be—a lady saloonkeeper. We've been everything and all things to each other, Hoppy Mangrum and I. And now *she's* got him!"

I'd gulp, and I'd say, "Aw, Doll, he'll still come in on payday, just like always. You'll hear him yelling whoopee and he'll wait at the foot of the stairs for you just like always."

Bubba blew him right out from under his hat — and that ended his meanness!

And all the time I'd know it was a damned lie. No Pike ever let loose of what they once got their hands on, and Marie might have platinum hair, brand-new platinum hair, but she was a Pike.

To be downright truthful, it wasn't altogether a lie. Hoppy did come in on payday nights—just like he used to do. And he'd sit down calm and peaceful-like at a table and Doll would sit down with him and they'd talk maybe an hour, or maybe a little more or a little less. A

bunch of wrinkles was coming between his eyes and his forehead was sort of corrugated, like, and it seemed he was grimmer than he used to be. I said they'd talk, but I take that back; for mostly they just sat—not even drinking much, just sort of staring unseeingly at the dancers and the gamblers and the drinkers and the dancehall gals raising payday hell.

I REMEMBER the night he brought Bubba in. Bubba was fourteen then and tall for his age, looking swell in his soldier suit with one of those shiny-brimmed caps and an over-the-shoulder belt. He was the spitting image of his paw, sort of a miniature Hoppy Mangrum. So the *three* of them sat there at that table, the kid drinking sody, and it was a toss-up which one of them looked the proudest, Doll or Hoppy or the kid! Proudest and happiest.

The swinging door pushed wide and little by little the noise died down, tapered off. Marie Mangrum, formerly Marie Pike, stood there, arms akimbo, glaring at the table where the three of them sat. Her face was dead-white and her mouth was wide-open—like she was about to scream.

Somehow or other she got control of herself, but seeing her all hopped up I couldn't help but remember what Doll had said about there being something rotten and worm-eaten in all the Pikes. Her lips clamped shut, she took two or three deep breaths. Hoppy didn't move, the kid was open-mouthed, Doll was as white as Marie.

"Damn you," said Marie and her voice was like a file on steel, "I told you about this! I told you to stay away from this—Well, let it drop, mister, I quit using bad language."

Hoppy said, when he could get in a word, "Go home, Marie. I'll be home by midnight."

Then she screamed. And that noise ran up and down my spine like the cold fingers of fate. She rushed at that table, and I believe she would have clawed Doll's eyes out of her face, but Hoppy just stood up and blocked her off. Once, twice, three times her curved fingers tore at his face, and each time they brought blood. She drew back then and quit screaming. But it got worse—she threw back her head and started laughing. She snatched the bottle off the table, she turned and heaved it. Right through the mirror! She ran for the bar—believe me they wasn't a man in her way by then! —and she picked up every bottle she could lay hands on. It took her thirty cents' worth of time to do five hundred dollars' worth of damage. Then she ran out the front door.

"Lockjaw," said Hoppy, calmly, though he was bleeding to beat hell, "I was drinking Old Overholt." Somehow I found another bottle and started toward the table. To Doll, Hoppy said, "Figure it up, Doll, and I'll pay you, cash on the barrelhead."

Believe it or not, that was that. He never mentioned it again, and no man in Cochise County ever had guts enough to bring it up. There was talk of course, about the Pike temper—old man Pike and one of his brothers died in the crazy house—but that talk was behind Hoppy Mangrum's back.

I often wondered if he went home that night and had it out with Marie. All he'd have to do was to tell her Doll was just a friend, that never since he'd said "I do" to the preacher had he so much as put a hand on anyone else. I reckon he didn't tell Marie that. Pikes are funny people; they'd always believe the worst anyway.

BUT HOPPY didn't quit coming in on payday night. The kid went on back to school, and Hoppy got more wrinkled and a little bit gray at the temples as time rolled by. Doll never changed. She was one of them ageless women that would keep her face and her figure until they put her in her coffin. Hoppy kept picking up land here and there, smart deals all of them and none of them crooked, and buying cattle and raising horses until by golly he was as big a man as there was around these here parts. And *that* brought him up against the Pikes.

I guess there'll always be people in the world like the Black Pikes. All three of the boys was well over six feet tall and not a damned one of them weighed more

than a hundred and fifty pounds. They were all swarthy, with hooked noses and shifty eyes and a slot of a mouth. And they was all the kind of guys that would lay down their right eyes for twenty acres of grassland—providing it put them twenty acres ahead of their nearest competitor. What I'm trying to point out is that money didn't mean a thing to the Pikes—but power did, and the feeling when they walked down the street that people were pointing them out saying "There goes one of *the* Pikes!" They was in politics of course—people like them always are. They owned near't the whole political setup in our part of the state.

I haven't mentioned them so far on account of they hadn't really played no part in my story, not to speak of. At one time or other, Joey, Johnny, and Dusty had hung around Doll—but not for long. She didn't fool with their kind. Dusty was the most interested in her of the three, I reckon. She told me once she could have had three thousand acres of black land and a heavy number of blaze-faced cows—but she passed it by. I also heard—a bartender hears a lot—that it was Dusty tried to make legal trouble for her. But not even a Pike could close up a square-shooter like Doll Dorais.

What I'm trying to point out is that in spite of the fact that Hoppy was their brother-in-law, when he got big there just wasn't room enough in our part of the state for both outfits. Why, I could tell you a dozen dirty little deals the Pikes put on Hoppy Mangrum's back—and he took them all without squawking.

One night Doll told him, right out. She said, and I heard her say it: "Hoppy, you're riding for trouble. The Pikes are going to get you sure as God made little green apples! You're getting too big and they can't stand it!"

Know what? He just grinned and patted her knee sort of absentminded, then changed the subject.

He said, offhand, "I hear you been having a little trouble with Carp Earnshaw, Doll."

She flared. "Trouble? With that tinhorn gunman? Don't go sticking your nose in Doll's affairs, Hoppy. I handled Carp, and I can keep on handling him!"

Doll had indeed taken care of Carp just a couple of nights previous. Carp had got fresh with her and she'd turned on him, kinda roughlike. Then he'd turned roughlike himself, being half drunk, and had threatened to bust up the place. In addition to which he'd stated his opinion that all human female critters was two degrees lower than hydrophoby skunks.

His sayin' a thing like that riled Doll considerable. She grabbed a bottle off the bar, cracked off the end of the bottle, jabbed the sharp edges against his kidneys to hold him steady while she got his gun.

Then Doll had yelled: "Send in Little Fawn, pronto!"

You saw Little Fawn? She was some younger in them days and maybe three pounds lighter—weighing around three hundred. So in came Little Fawn, stone-faced and greasy as ever, from the kitchen. And Doll said, "Go on, damn you, Carp, go on! Get down on your knees and say it or I'll cut your guts out!"

Down went Carp on his knees, mumbling, but getting louder when Doll put the busted bottle against his throat. He said, "I am a dog, I am a dirty dog. I ain't fitten to kiss a decent woman's feet, but I am sorry, and on account of Little Fawn wearing moccasins I guess she won't catch nothing!"

He quit. Grimly Doll pushed on the bottle. A little red worm of blood went down his neck. She said, "Go on."

He did. He kissed the toes of Little Fawn's dirty, smelly moccasins—and Carp Earnshaw wasn't a bad man in our county any more!

WHEN Ferguson got ready to retire and go back East—Ferguson of the Flying F—he sure got Hoppy in trouble, although he no doubt figured he was doing him a favor. He sold out to Hoppy and the deed was recorded before the Pikes even knew the ranch was on the market. Now that sounds like a little thing, but when you figure that even the Flying F was around 10,000 acres, you see what I mean. As far as land went, it put Hoppy Mangrum right up on top,

and no Black Pike was going to take that lying down. Black Pikes wasn't built that way.

Doll warned Hoppy. I warned Hoppy. Everybody told him to watch his step and he had one answer. He'd grin, tired-like, and say, "I'm married into the family." Just like that meant something!

Me, Lockjaw Osborne, I am one of the few people that ever knew exactly what happened. The story, as it got out, went like this: Hoppy rode into town about three months later just as I was locking up Doll's saloon. He looked like a ghost. He didn't look to right or left, he just *clump-clumped* in a staggering run right through the joint and on up the stairs, and Doll's door slammed behind him. She came out in a minute with haughty eyes, and moved into another room. For the next ten days he stayed right there in Doll's room alone, night and day. The Old Overholt I took up there would have floated a battleship! First Joey Pike came looking for him, and had to talk to Hoppy through the door.

"Okay," said Joey Pike, "she sent me, and I got to tell her something. What'll it be?"

Through the door came Hoppy's thick voice, "Tell Marie I said I was going to stay here, that I'm never coming home again."

Joey Pike said, "What about your spread, pardner? You can't run it from a saloon like this."

"To hell with the spread," was his answer. "If I see her again, I'll choke her. She can have the spread, damn her."

And when Joey Pike came down the stairs he was grinning like a skunk on a garbage pail!

That's the way the story was told, but me, I know what made him come a-running to Doll. Why? I ain't going to lie—I listened at the door. Remember, I said he went staggering up there, just like he was drunk? Well, sir, by the time I got my ear laid against the wood all I could hear was Hoppy Mangrum crying! There's something about a man crying that get's you. Naw, I don't mean a drunk, I mean a two fisted he-man like Hoppy Mangrum!

Pretty soon I heard Doll saying, "There, there, there," just like you'd soothe a baby!

The sobs sort of quieted, and Hoppy said, "Damn her—if it had been anybody else but Carp Earnshaw—and right in my own house! Look, Doll, her in a chair and him on his knees beside her, his arms around her, kissing her! My wife!"

Outside the door I had thought, "Great Godfrey! He's killed Carp and his wife, too!"

"I started to kill him," went on Hoppy, "and instead I couldn't force a word out of my mouth! I . . . I . . . well, I'd idolized her, you know that. She was . . . a . . . gentlewoman . . . and I figgered when Bubba finished up and come home— Me, I ain't nothing, you know what I've done—what I've been . . . I thought she could make it up to Bubba—but Carp Earnshaw—!" Then he started crying again.

Doll was crying too, and I happened to notice that tears were sort of trickling down *my* face! It even makes me feel badly now thinking about it, him looking forward to Bubba's future, and then finding out Marie had them feet of clay you hear about.

TO CUT it short, when he came down from the second floor after ten days, he'd lost twenty pounds and had the shakes. I mean he was in bad shape. The rest of it happened almost too fast to believe. Nemesis bobbed up in the shape of Dusty Pike. Dusty was the youngest of the three Black Pikes—and to my mind the most dangerous. He wasn't quite as shifty-eyed as Joey and Johnny, and his jaw was a little squarer. Not that it meant a lot.

He came into Doll's saloon and found Hoppy sitting by himself at the back table, right over there. Hoppy was drinking, and Hoppy was just a shadow of his old self. Dusty Pike didn't sit down. He stood there, with his hand on his gunbutt ready to go into action.

He said, "Mangrum, I've been hearing things, bad things, wicked things, that

Carp said: "I am a dirty dog. I ain't fitten to kiss a decent woman's feet. And he kissed the toes of Little Fawn's moccasins, promptly.

you've been saying about my sister. I want them stopped!"

Hoppy's hands was beneath the table. He didn't move.

"I'm going to give you a chance to stand up," said Dusty Pike, "and then I'm going to blow your belt buckle through your spine."

Hoppy had that vacuous, drunk man's grin—but from where I stood I could see his eyes. Not slitted, not narrowed. But wide-open and blazing like they was the night he buffaloed Carp Earnshaw.

He hiccoughed. And I couldn't catch what he said. Nobody ain't ever going to know what he said. For Dusty Pike cursed and drew and Hoppy shot him through the table top. As simple as that. Then Hoppy walked out the door and went over to the jailhouse and found Wheeler, our marshal, and gave himself up.

What followed is not very pretty. In a little matter of three weeks a Pike-bought judge gave Hoppy a life sentence at Huntsville, and I always figured he was damned lucky not to get the rope! He wouldn't say a word at his trial, just sat there stony-eyed and stony-jawed. Doll brought in an Eastern lawyer and he was good—but he had two strikes on him before he went to bat. Hoppy wouldn't say a word about Marie, about catching her kissing Carp Earnshaw, and he wouldn't let Doll talk. Marie was never called.

I'll be truthful: Bubba Mangrum didn't enter my head. I'd seen the kid only once, remember. Afterward, I found out that one of the Pikes wrote him a letter and told him his daddy was a killer. And it wasn't but three days after that that Doll got the letter from him saying he was leaving school.

DOLL tried to get a pardon for Hoppy. No luck. As Hoppy's wife, Marie now owned the whole Mangrum spread, because try as Doll might she could not find Bubba Mangrum. Even them Eastern detective fellows failed to trace him down, and nobody knows how much money she spent trying to locate him.

Hoppy lasted five years at Huntsville Prison before he died. You can't cage an eagle. And during those five years Marie Mangrum never once showed up in our town! The two Pikes, Joey and Johnny, when asked, simply said she was sick, and Doc Gallagher let it out that the old Pike ailment had caught up with her. In other words, he hinted she was crazy.

Doll Dorais is tough. Don't you ever forget it. She didn't blow up and go to hell, not Doll. She got outside more, she used to take Hoppy's black gelding and ride for hours, and always alone. She went on with an even temper, operating the joint as always, and only once in all those years did she ever get really mad. And that was at me. She heard me remark that the button, Bubba, was a hell of a kid to jump up and disappear just because his pop killed a man. I went on to say any kid with spirit would have stuck by his father.

I won't tell you how mad she got—but I damned near lost my job! Even when Johnny Pike showed the note from Huntsville, right after Hoppy died, she didn't lose her temper that bad.

The note said—and it was addressed to Marie Mangrum:

Marie, my dear: I am sick and know I am about to die. Because Bubba has deserted me in my hour of need, he is no son of mine. The spread is all yours. Love, Hoppy.

Doll just looked at that note when Johnny Pike showed it to her, and shrugged her pretty shoulders. She said, "It's no skin off my elbow, Johnny Pike, why show it to me?"

Pike grinned his mean grin and walked off like a pleased cat.

IT WAS payday night when he walked in. He shouldered the swing doors aside and stood there grinning, his Stetson pushed back, his thumbs in his belt, sort of teetering on his heels. I grabbed the bottle and drank right out of the neck, and I wasn't the only ranny that thought he was seeing things.

It was Hoppy Mangrum—but a Hoppy Mangrum about twenty-two years old! He swaggered up to the bar, and he said, "Old Overholt, Lockjaw."

I put it out. I said, mildly, "Bubba, you been gone a long time." Cause it *was* Bubba, it had to be! And just as I was getting ready to send someone for Doll, them doors swung again and in walked Carp Earnshaw. Right up to Bubba he made his way and slapped him on the back. Bubba grinned and asked for an-

other glass for his *friend*. As the saying goes, that tore it.

Bubba said, "Yeah, I stayed away a long time. Carp, here, found me down Mexico way, and told me the score. Lockjaw, I want to see the woman who ruined my dad."

So I stood there turning it over in my mind, wondering how he expected to find Marie Mangrum in Doll's saloon.

"Tell her," went on Bubba, "that she might as well know I'm going to horsewhip her through the streets of this town, that I'm going to burn this joint. And all the law and order between here and the Pecos ain't going to stop me." And it was then I knew he was talking about Doll, and not Marie!

His eyes——those his eyes! Just like his dad's, wide-open, all flashing pupil, and his mouth twisted in that same purple slit! That's what I mean when I talk about *really* bad men!

Somebody said, "Hello, Bubba." And Doll came down the steps. Like yesterday I remember it. She wasn't wearing her usual short dress. She was wearing something black and shimmering and gleaming that looked like it had been painted on her, from her curved throat clean down to her slender ankles. She came down the steps, slow, slow, one hand behind her back, and the boys made a path for her. Bubba Mangrum stepped away from the bar and waited. Bubba wasn't a Mangrum any more. He was Old Man Death, waiting there to reach out and tap her on the shoulder with his bony fingers and say, "I want *you*, Doll Dorais."

She stopped just at arm's length. She smiled, and I'll swear she looked like that picture the Eyetalian feller painted once. She said, "I heard you, Bubba. You don't really mean what you said. Somebody—probably this Carp Earnshaw thing—has been filling you full of lies. You don't really believe them—you wouldn't be Hoppy's son if you did. But if you want it this way—here!"

HER HAND came from behind her back. She thrust a heavy quirt at him. He took it. He took a step backward and he raised the quirt.

I pulled the sawed-off shotgun out from beneath the bar and I said, "No, Bubba. Just drop it right there on the floor."

He never even looked my way. He said, "Shoot and be damned. That's the way I'll end up anyway."

I said, "You, Carp, did you tell him *why* his daddy left Marie and gave away the spread?"

"He told me," grated Bubba. "He told me plenty—enough to ruin my life. There I am, peaceful at last, ready to marry the finest girl in the world and he comes along! He tells me how Doll connived with the Pikes, damn her. Oh, she could wrap dad around her finger—but I know her for what she is!" What Bubba said then was enough to burn the place down.

Doll went white. For the only time in all the years I've known her, she looked her age. Finally she said, "Go ahead, Bubba, if that's what you think."

And I said, "Move, Bubba, just move, that's all. You'll never touch her. Carp hates her because he couldn't marry her! That's the why of this!"

And he said, "Shoot, damn your dirty soul, shoot!"

I reckon we'd have been frozen like that yet if it hadn't been for the Professor, the poor drunken bum who banged the piano. He started playing, *There'll Be A Hot Time In The Old Town Tonight* and that busted it up.

Earnshaw said, "Let's let it be for the present, pal."

The quirt fell to the floor. Bubba turned around and went out the door. Doll went back upstairs. I put the sawed-off shotgun away and said, "The next round is on the house."

So about three I locked up and I went upstairs and I listened to Doll for about fifteen minutes. I remember saying, "It won't work, Doll. He's Hoppy all over again, Hoppy on the kill, and with Carp to egg him on all hell can't stop him."

"We'll try," was all she'd say. "Most of it depends on you, Lockjaw. If you ever loved me, do your best. It's my only chance."

I found him at the Lone Star Hotel. I threw down on him and I tossed old Hoppy's clothes on the bed, and told

Bubba what we'd do. He knew something big was planned, otherwise a man in his mental shape wouldn't have been scared of an old fat guy like me with a gun! He put on Hoppy's clothes. We went down the backstairs, and he got on Hoppy's gelding—the black baby with the white face that Doll had saved all these years! Not that he said anything. Sometimes I think it was because I told him right out that he'd see Doll, but whatever it was, he went peaceful.

We made the Pike ranch about four in the morning, just at false dawn when the roosters was blatting their silly brains out. And just as we rode over the rim of rock on the north side of the house, the flames busted out the roof of the barn! It had been a dry season and that barn went up like tinder. I herded Bubba toward the front of the house, went right on up to the front door and walked him in.

Doll was waiting, her face strained and gray in the dawn. She pointed toward a door. She said, "Walk in there, Bubba." He hesitated a minute—and stalked through the door. He didn't close it behind him.

AN OLD, old voice quavered, "Hoppy! *Hoppy!* I knew you'd come! Ah, Hoppy, they've been so mean to me, so bad to poor Marie!"

She got up out of the tumbled bed and literally leaped at Bubba. What's that? I don't know if I can describe her. I stood there remembering how Marie looked with that head of platinum hair when she came back from the East, before poor Hoppy married her. And I saw that in six or seven years she'd become—well, just an old crone whose madness gleamed in her eyes. And yet I was sorry for her.

"There's something rotten and wormeaten about the Pike's."

Doll said that years ago. She was right.

"Hoppy, lover, you're all I ever loved," moaned Marie. "I was jealous, you know how I hated her! I hated Bubba, because he was your son, and *her* son, I hated *you* for telling me the truth. But Hoppy, you got to believe there was nothing between me and Carp! I fainted that day and Carp picked me up off the floor. It was my brother, Dusty, that brought you in to see Carp kiss me, wasn't it? It must have been, for he bragged about it afterward! Hoppy, I never blamed you for leaving me, but I wanted you to know the truth about that! I didn't cheat on you! They've kept me locked up, Hoppy, locked away from everyone, but I knew you'd come. Go back to her, Hoppy, to that woman, Doll, to Bubba's mother! Now you know . . . and . . . I'm happy—!"

He put her gently onto the bed, and she was smiling peaceful-like, her poor eyes moving gently in the first little gleam of sunlight. He looked at her a long time, and he came walking out of the room to meet Doll.

He said, "I guess I sort of suspected, in a way, last night. I wanted Lockjaw to shoot me, for I'd *promised* Carp I'd whip her out of town! Now—!"

Yeah, I've been holding out on you to make the story better. I'd known right along. At least I'd suspected. Doll knew she could never change, so she gave Bubba to Hoppy. There's women like that. She wanted Bubba to have a chance, and what chance would a kid have knowing his mama was—well—a saloonkeeper?

I gulped hard, and I said, "Okay, Bubba. Kiss your mama."

He gulped harder, and he said, "I got a little unfinished business, before I'm fit to do it." He walked past her and right through the house and out the back door. I followed. Doll stayed long enough to close the bedroom door and then came along.

The barn was a smouldering wreck by then, and Johnny and Joey Pike was fit to be tied. Joey took one look at Doll and started to reach for his gun. That was before he really saw Bubba. Bubba said, "Keep reaching, mister. This is a showdown." But not Joey Pike! No reaching for the Black Pikes against sudden death like Bubba Mangrum!

DOLL SAID, "I burned your barn, Pikes. Maybe Bubba will burn your house!" Damnedest thing I ever heard. Me, I was shaking in my boots! She went

on, "I think, however, he might listen to reason, providing we check up sometime in the near future. He wants Hoppy's spread back—but quick!"

Bubba said, "Will somebody please make a move? *Please!*"

Somebody did! A .45 cracked and Bubba spun around and went down. Carp Earnshaw was sitting his horse not twenty yards away, him having rode up unnoticed in the excitement. He blew the smoke away from his gunbarrel. And that was the last move Carp Earnshaw ever made, consciously. For Bubba blew him right out from under his hat—and that's the end of the story!

What's that? Naw, Carp got him through the left shoulder. That was all. Bubba carried the arm in a sling for a while . . . .

The Pikes? Why, that man who just left here was Joey Pike. Bubba Mangrum is slowly but surely taking them over—he's the best cowman in these here parts. He brought his gal up from Sonora and married her and they're living out on the place. I don't understand you when you say it don't make sense? Bubba's taking care of Marie, Bubba and his wife! And—

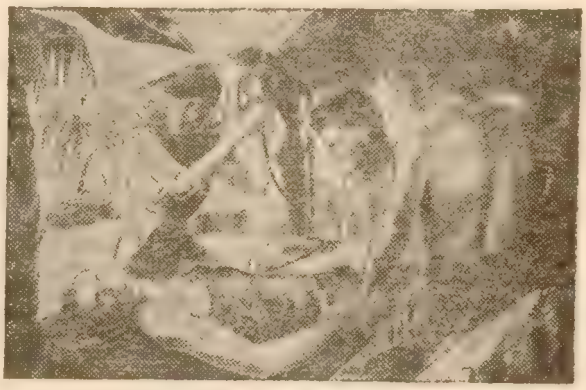
Naw, the Pikes didn't make no trouble. It was cut and dried. Remember the note they showed around, even to Doll, supposedly from Hoppy in the pen, cutting Bubba off because he'd run out on him? Sure, now, Doll and me both was a little ashamed to say anything at the time. But poor Hoppy never had much education—you see he couldn't even sign his own name, let alone write a note like that!

Doll? Now if you'll wait until four o'clock you'll see her—by golly, it *is* four! Look! There she comes! Right down the stairs, proud and erect and breath-taking as the feller said—just like always. Mister, women like Doll live forever!

Hello, Doll!

Of Course,

You Can't Be There—But—



NO, you can't be there at the dressing station to give him a mother's care. All you can do is be thankful that the Army and the Red Cross take such good care of our boys. But you can help see to it that such precious supplies as blood plasma, food and ammunition, reach the front in prime condition—ready to do their job.

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Ten Bad Little Indians

(Continued from page 23)

lodge, his black eyes fixed upon the still-talking messenger.

"The evil one from Durango speaks with the lying tongue," Sterne said.

The cold hard voice of Long-Eye Sterne fell upon the ears of the old man and turned the sunken eyes of Chief Tawawa toward him.

"I have brought Spotted Elk home to the lodge of his father," Sterne said.

The Durango messenger looked in amazement at Long-Eye Sterne as he placed the body of Spotted Elk before old Chief Tawawa.

"You see," said Long-Eye Sterne, "that is not a white man's bayonet in his heart." And there, incredibly enough, projected the bone-handled hilt of a long Comanche skinning knife that had come only minutes before from the belt of the other Durango messenger now lying dead with a broken neck.

THE drunken emissary from Durango stared at the corpse. There was a sudden, silent menace in the black eyes of Tawawa's warriors. The Durango killer knew this was a trick, but to give the lie to Long-Eye Sterne was beyond even his drunken hardihood.

Old Tawawa's features were inscrutable as he gazed upon the body of his dead son. The Durango killer moved with the swiftness of a scared deer. Yet he would not have been quick enough to escape the younger Comanche warriors if Long-Eye Sterne had not spoken:

"Let him go. I want him to return to Durango. We have much to speak between us."

Sterne was trying to keep his mind and heart from fear for Enna Caulder. Her life was at stake. But there were also the many other women, children and men of the wagon train to consider.

He realized that some of Tawawa's more impetuous redskins had already joined the outlaw band of Durango. Sterne was facing old men who had been given recent reason to hate the palefaces. Ahong those who had fled from the reservation were old ones, women and children.

By the dictum of the army the lives of many Comanches would be demanded as the result of the act of the one killer, Durango, and his original small band. In the end Durango himself would escape.

Many Indians and many palefaces would die. Sterne's heart cried out against this thing. Just now the massacre of the wagon train was in the making with only Captain Echols, the tenderfoot captain, to employ tactics that would leave scalped woman and men, burned wagons, as another massacre to be charged up to the Comanches. His chore here would not be easy.

Sterne was trusted only because he was a blood brother. Upon that he was forced to rely.

As motionless as if his dead son were not lying there before him, old Chief Tawawa waited. He spoke with slow deliberation.

"You come for more than to bring back your blood brother," he said. "Speak on at once. We have no time to wait."

Would the merry, spirited Enna Caulder be alive? Could he save her and at the same time perform his greater task?

Yet Sterne knew all this could not be hastened. The Comanches admired and demanded oratory. Already the pipe of the long stem was being lighted and passed toward Chief Tawawa.

"All of many years you have known me," said Long-Eye Sterne. "Spotted Elk wrote with his skinning knife on my arm and our blood was mingled when we saved each other from the mad charge of a wild buffalo herd. I am a white man, but I am also a Comanche."

"Enju," grunted the circle of old men in agreement.

"Years ago when the mad Durango killed his first white man he should have died. But he has lived to hunt through

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A United States War message prepared by the War Advertising Council; approved by the Office of War Information; and contributed by this magazine in cooperation with the Magazine Publishers of America.

the lodges of the palefaces. Many soldiers have been sent by the Great White Father, and even now the company of Colonel Hauser has been tricked by the wily Durango. But surely his men will return to exact vengeance upon all of your tribe. Why have you not killed Durango yourselves? Only the Comanche can bring this mad dog to justice without much blood being poured upon the trails of the San Pablos."

Old Tawawa's black eyes were unblinking alongside his craggy beak of a nose.

Long-Eye Sterne went on: "You would ask me if all white men are not mad men. I can reply to you only that all this senseless slaughter has been because you have permitted your own mad dog to live."

Sterne had held back his high card to the last. He was watching the unblinking eyes of the older warriors.

"I bring to you also my own solemn pledge that you will return safely to your reservation if you will work with me. I am the new Indian Agent of the San Pablos."

Long-Eye Sterne sat down. One old man and another arose and spoke. The language of the Comanche demanded these long minutes of oratory. All this time a long-stemmed peace pipe had been held by an old one who sat close to Tawawa. Tawawa said no word, but he reached out his long brown fingers and took the pipe. A younger warrior came over instantly with a live coal from the lodge fire. Chief Tawawa took a long draw on the stem of the pipe, pulling the smoke through his withered lips. He exhaled it slowly through his eaglelike nostrils. He turned the pipe and extended it to Long-Eye Sterne.

"Long-Eye, blood-brother of my dead son, when do we ride?"

CHAPTER VI

They Ride Too Late

MOUNTED on Stormy, with old Chief Tawawa on his bareback pony beside him, Long-Eye Sterne started down the valley in the night. Two files of some four hundred Comanches deployed beside them. Some were armed with the old needle guns. Some carried their bows. Mostly the skinning knife, the short spear and the tomahawk were their only weapons. About one mile above the camp of the mad dog Durango, Long-Eye Sterne pulled up. Like ghosts moving in the night, two files of Indians separated in the mountain mist.

"We go from here on in silence," said Long-Eye Sterne.

"*Enju,*" grunted old Tawawa.

Ahead of them glowed the fire where Durango's murdering braves had been holding drunken wassail.

"Wait," said Long-Eye Sterne. As silently as a mountain cat might have moved in the night, Sterne rounded the rocks, his primed pistol held ready. If he could take Durange alone and free Enna Caulder from the stake to which she had been tied, he felt that he still might save the girl's life and avert the attack upon the wagon train. He was now fully aware that at least half a hundred of the more hot-blooded Comanches had secretly joined Durango. His only thought and purpose at the moment was to rescue Enna Caulder and, if possible, kill Durango with his own hands.

Five minutes later he stood by the bole of a great mountain oak and looked upon the dying embers of the fire. The Durango maurauders were already on their way for the attack upon the wagon train. The stake where Enna Caulder had been a prisoner was empty.

Sterne's heart and instinct impelled him to search for the missing girl, although fearful of what he might find. Every bit of him cried out to know the truth. But it was too late now. A more desperate need was at hand. One that he himself had helped create. Cursing through clenched teeth, the mountain man turned back his horse. The mad dog, Durango, with half a hundred recruited Comanches, might already be making his attack upon the wagon train two miles below.

"Damnation," gritted Sterne. "Why didn't I have more sense?"

He swung up on Stormy, made sure the Sharp's buffalo rifle was in place

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and sent the horse plunging recklessly back toward old Tawawa and the band of redskins waiting for him, for Sterne had figured that to avoid senseless killing of Comanches and whites, it would be best to draw Captain Echols and his soldiers away from the wagon train. He knew that already one silent file of Indians, Durango's, was making ready for the attack upon the wagon train. Sterne himself had been partially responsible for a trick that was to remove the soldiers, when he had released Spotted Elk. He had thought only to clear the way for old Tawawa and his braves to deal with Durango.

"Durango's gone! We may be too late!" he said to Tawawa.

The old chief grunted. "We ride like hell."

BALD-HEADED Eric Robb was yelling: "Yuh dangnation skutz! Yo're headin' right in for a massacree!" The seventy-year-old wagon boss was being restrained by two hulking soldiers.

"Come on! Get those wagons moving! I'm not being taken in again by any crazy woman." That was Captain Echols, furious over the discovery that Mrs. Larkin was not having a baby. Nate Larkin had at last figured it out, got his mad up and upset Ma Caulder's applecart. Angered to the point of recklessness by the trick that had held up the wagon train, Captain Echols had commanded the move in the middle of the misty night. The wagoneers were nearly all hitched. The first wagon was beginning to creak down from the hump. John and Ma Caulder were silent, heavy of heart and stony-eyed. They had been trying to get the picture out of their minds of what might have happened to the fair-haired and vivacious girl who was still missing. Eric Robb's cursing yells did him no good now.

"If we're caught in an ambush we can lay it to Long-Eye Sterne!" shouted Captain Echols.

The second wagon started to move. They were covered by mist and rain. The hooting of night owls and the howling of coyotes where there were neither night owls nor coyotes should have warned the tenderfoot captain. He was too furious over the tricks that had frustrated his orders to heed any such intangible warning.

A few smoky torches flared about the big Conestoga wagons as they broke up the circle that had been their chief protection. Then it happened.

Hooting, screeching shadows came hurtling from one side. Half a dozen flaming arrows curved over the wagons. The Comanches were making their attack. Hastily trying to correct his own mistake, Captain Echols yelled, "Sound the charge!"

"Great Jehosophat and little catfish," groaned Eric Robb. "There ain't nothin' goin' to save us from the redskins now!"

Captain Echols was in his first Indian fight. He saw swirling, yelling ghosts on ponies riding into a curious circle, not around the wagons but off to one side.

"Somethin's fishy," grunted Eric Robb. "Them redskins don't put on any war dance like that—"

But whether fishy or not, the doughty Captain Echols had mounted his twenty men and gone charging pellmell upon that circling band of redskins. If he had been a veteran he might have noticed that while flaming arrows arched over the wagons, not one struck anywhere among the clustered wagoneers who were hurriedly trying to swing their wagons back into a circle.

"Atta men! Wipe them out!" shouted Captain Echols.

Some of the older soldiers realized there was a polecat smell to this, but a captain is a captain even if he is really only a shavetail. As if they were only shadows, the two hundred or more Comanches started to dissolve before the charging soldiers.

"Great Gor Amighty," groaned Eric Robb. "They're leadin' them straight into an ambuscade." For the Comanches were not only in sudden retreat, they were practically dissolving in all directions. Captain Echols had no tactics to fit twenty men into running down two hundred vanishing redskins.

Only a short time later his tight little

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band of blue-clad troops were nearly a mile from the wagons, and scattered. They might as well have been trying to catch badgers by the neck before they ducked into their holes.

THEN it happened again. This time there was a distinctly different note in the yells of the Indians who smashed toward the wagons from the opposite side, but at their head rode two murdering killers bearing torches that revealed an appalling sight.

"Enna! Our gal!" It was the hoarse cry of Ma Caulder.

The torches had revealed the white girl bound across the back of an Indian pony, riding in such position that any random shot from the wagons would endanger the girl's life, and behind her was the mad dog Durango.

Cursing wagoneers lifted their rifles and held their fire. From the deep shadows behind the bound and helpless girl the first fire spears hurtled upon the wagons. A canvas top flamed. A wagoneer groaned and fell. A woman screamed.

"Drat their rotten black hearts!" yelled bald Eric Robb.

Then, with only a one-shot musket, the oldster slithered out into the darkness.

Durango himself was lying low on his pony's neck. He was riding directly behind Enna Caulder, shielded by her body. Eric Robb went to one knee in the mud and tried for one of the torch bearers beside the bound girl.

The Indian twisted, screamed and plunged from his pony. But a short spear slammed into Eric Robb's shoulder and he went to his face.

Another wagon was blazing. The smart Durango had planned his attack well. Captain Echols had aided the Indians materially by having the wagons already swung out of a compact circle. A wagon-train horse pierced by an arrow went down and tangled the attempt to rebuild the defense.

The attacking Comanches were scattering now. Lusting for the kill, they were coming in with spear and tomahawk and skinning knives. Only a few had needle guns, which were ineffective.

Eric Robb lay in the mud cursing any and all shavetail officers, and especially one Captain Echols, whose troop was still pursuing vanishing redskins a mile away.

CHAPTER VII

Tawawa Strikes

LONG-EYE STERNE was riding hard beside old Tawawa when he saw the impending fate of Enna Caulder. Tawawa's braves, sweeping down in a half circle, were flanking Durango's killers.

Sterne knew then, for all time, why he had suddenly left the Big Muddy two years before. His heart was being carried to the depths of hell over there on that flying pony.

"We strike, Tawawa!"

"It is good!"

"Leave Durango to me—"

"I have said I would take Durango," replied the old chief. "It is for the white girl then, Long-Eye?"

But Sterne could not reply. The great horse Stormy was already in his long stride. Durango had not yet discovered that the good Comanches of Tawawa were upon him.

Sterne saw one torch bearer beside the girl shot from his pony. Without holding up the flying stride of his horse, Sterne cracked his buffalo rifle once. The second torch bearer hurtled from his pony.

Sterne knew then he was going to kill Durango with his bare hands. He breathed with deep relief when the pony bearing Enna bolted straight for the wagons.

Durango's bared and greased body came erect as Sterne dived upon him. The killer was a pockmarked redskin with huge shoulders and powerful hands. Even in the darkness his black eyes glittered murderously.

"Eeyah!" he yelled, snapping up a short spear and driving at Sterne's buckskinned body.

Sterne felt the spear strike the thick muscles of his chest. He was already in midair and his weight drove Durango

from his pony. They went to the ground with the spear still partially impaling the mountain man.

Nevertheless, Sterne's gripping hands clutched at the mad dog Indian's greasy throat. His fingers slipped and the pain of the biting spear became nauseating. Durango's black-bound head butted into his face.

Thereafter it seemed to Sterne he endured an agony for hours, although it was but a few minutes. Around him and Durango the battle of the Comanches raged. Tawawa's braves were upon the killers of their tribe with spear and knife and tomahawk.

Almost slipping into blackness, Sterne found a hold at last. There was a sickening crack of bone under the strong hands of the mountain man.

As Sterne staggered to his feet the short spear still was imbedded in his chest muscles.

THEN there was old Tawawa sliding from his pony. The chief reached forth quick hands. There was a twist that seemed to tear Sterne's body apart. But he still stood swaying.

"It is finished, blood brother of my house," said Chief Tawawa quietly.

When Captain Echols and his misled troop came charging back into the camp of the wagon train, a strange spectacle was presented. The shavetail halted, pistol in hand, plainly in doubt as to what his duty might now be. Lined up in a solemn procession were some two hundred Comanches. Perhaps Captain Echols had never seen calmer or grimmer faces.

"What's this? What's this?" he roared. "Seize these men!"

But seizing two hundred statuesque and emotionless Comanches seemed a little beyond the comprehension of his twenty bluecoats and the wagoneers.

Old Chief Tawawa sat upon his pony uttering no word. Long-Eye Sterne stood beside him, supporting himself with one hand upon the pony's hackamore. The blood from the deep wound had soaked Sterne's buckskin shirt. His face was a battered mass. He spoke quietly:

"Yuh haven't got savvy to understand

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perhaps. This is Chief Tawawa of the San Pablos Comanches. He has just removed the mad dog, Durango, and all his marauders. He comes in peace but asks no favor."

Captain Echols stared a moment, then he roared: "Take this man Long-Eye Sterne! Make him a prisoner! He aided in the escape of a killer Indian! He is responsible for all this bloodshed! Get ready to move on to Fort Lodge!"

Among his own men there was no movement. Among the wagoneers there was no movement. The voice of old Eric Robb, who was himself severely wounded, cracked out:

"Heh, heh! Yuh still would want to get the devil by the tail!"

What might have happened then would never be known. There came the roaring thunder of a full troop of horses. The rattling of sabers of cavalrymen.

Colonel Hauser was a stern man, most of whose dignity lay in a gray goatee. Back from the fruitless chase of Durango, he swept the scene just before him with keen eyes. Captain Echols saluted.

"I have just ordered the arrest of this so-called scout. I am taking him to Fort Lodge. He has defied the army's orders. He has stirred up mutiny among these Indians!"

"Yo're loco. He jest took Durango, him and old Chief Tawawa," cackled Eric Robb.

"That is good," stated Colonel Hauser. "But it doesn't matter about his arrest. Captain Echols, this is William Long-Eye Sterne. When he arrived he held a commission from the Department of Indian Affairs in Washington. He has been and is in complete command of the San Pablos reservation. We have been relieved of duty here. Sterne has known this all the time. . . ."

WHILE Enna Caulder was bathing the torn wound in his chest, Long-Eye Sterne spoke contritely:

"You know Enna, I have to confess. I myself am of the blood of the Comanches."

The fair-haired girl smiled tightly.

"Be quiet, Long-Eye. Stop boasting."

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Hot-Lead Leavening

(Continued from page 31)

gree murder, and he was immediately sentenced to be hanged at an early date!

WHEN Sheriff Jaeger had taken Belton back to his cell, Solo waited for the courtroom to clear, then walked over to the jail with Belton's attorney. Jaeger was sitting slumped at his desk. He looked up, his expression baffled and hopeless.

"It's awful," Jaeger groaned. "I can't b'lieve Buck kilt ol' Tom or, if he did, that he'd marry Alice right after. Yet it looks like it had to be him. There wasn't no evidence to the otherwise."

"If I ever defended an innocent man, Belton seemed to be the one. Yet the evidence against him was conclusive," the lawyer agreed.

"How about Mitoga's actions at the church?" Solo demanded.

"I told you, once before," the lawyer impatiently snapped, "that that has no bearing on the case, and there was no reason to try to bring it into the trial. Mitoga likely just hesitated to stop the wedding ceremony to break such news—though it would have been better for the girl Belton married if he had."

"Well," Jaeger croaked, "the law says the sheriff has to spring the trap under Belton. But I won't. I'll hand in my badge."

"Wait," the lawyer cautioned. "I'm going to see if I can't dig up at least one small thing on which to base an appeal for a new trial. Although," he concluded, "I doubt that I can."

Rising, Jaeger let Solo and the lawyer into the cellblock. Dazed and shaken, Buck Belton looked through the bars and mumbled, "It's a hell of a thing to do to an innocent man, Solo. A hell of a thing to do."

"Aw, somethin' will turn up an' you'll get an appeal." Solo forced a confident smile. "I don't think you kilt Nola's ol' man, an' she don't, neither. An' don't worry about Circle Arrow. I'll keep on lookin' after it an' the TN, like I been doin', an' Nola will look after your wife."

DURING the days ensuing, Solo rode range, chopped waterholes in ice so the cattle could drink, forked hay to calves, and rode his seat to the gristle between Circle Arrow and TN. He also made trips to Centerfire to see Belton and let him know that his whiteface herd was coming along fine, and to let Nola Norris know how the TN was faring. Once, when they were talking about the spread, the girl had blurted, "Oh, Lon, I don't think Buck's guilty any more than you do, and I wish there was something you could do, or try to do, to clear him. With you running TN, cleaning up the scrub stock and running whitefaces with Buck, I could hold the ranch and feel happy and secure."

It was on the tip of Solo's tongue to ask her if she meant what he was hoping she did, but he held the words back. Scowling, he said, "I can't help Belton, Nola. Why, when I horned into this mess by goin' on the stand for him at the trial, I got called a double-rigged kak hobo, didn't I? An' when I said I figgered that Mitoga had a reason for not arrestin' Belton until after the weddin' was over, I was told I was prejudiced an' tryin' to make somethin' ag'in him out of nothin'.

"Nope, there's nothin' I can do," he concluded.

"I understand." Nola sighed wearily. "I guess that all anyone can do is wait."

At the end of two weeks, then, that period of waiting came to an end. Solo was cleaning out the stable at Circle Arrow when Blackie Mitoga and a cowpuncher from Sam Argyle's ranch rode up. Solo, pitchfork in hand, stood in the doorway when they dismounted.

"A'right, you damn' scrub," Mitoga snarled, wasting no words on Solo. "Spool yuhr doofunnies an' get to hell off Circle Arrer."

"Who says so?" Solo grunted.

"I do, for one," Mitoga spat. "For another, Mrs. Belton. So get a-goin', before I kick yuh plumb to the county line!"

"Don't try 'er." His eyes glittering, Solo held the pitchfork like a javelin. "I'll get off this spread, since it ain't none of my bus'ness no more. But you claw your iron or lay a paw on me, I'll bodaciously jab this fork right through your guts. So get out of my way!"

"You keep goin', yuh scabby runt." Mitoga backed away from the threatening tines. "Get yuhr walkin' papers from Mrs. Belton at the bank, an' don't let me catch yuh in Centerfire after today."

With his meager possibles in a gunny sack tied to his saddle, Solo rode to town and went to the bank, where Alice Belton still worked. Acting and talking in the manner of a woman plunged into utter despair and unable to think clearly any more, Alice said, "I'm sorry, Solo, but Mr. Argyle advises me I can't afford to pay your wages any longer. He'll have one of his own men take charge of Circle Arrow until after Buck—until things are suh-settled."

Sobbing, Alice pressed a handkerchief to her face.

LEAVING the bank, Solo went over to Luce's Mercantile, where Nola greeted him tremulously, then cried, "Oh, Lon, Buck's lawyer has given up. He conferred with an ex-judge of the State Supreme Court in the capital, and was told that there wasn't a single thing on which an appeal could be based or granted."

"Ahhh, hell, what a rotten mess," Solo groaned.

"Everything's a mess," Nola quavered. "As if that news wasn't enough, Sam Argyle came in here a little while ago. He informed me that there was a payment past due on the note dad signed. Argyle said he couldn't have an unknown drifter caring for a spread that's in debt to the bank, and he's sending a man to take the TN over. Then he had the nerve to suggest I might save the TN by being nice to and sensible about Blackie Mitoga!"

"Soon as it's known Belton's last chance

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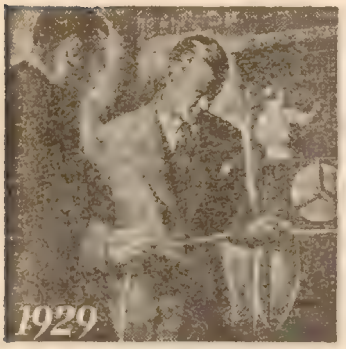
What a boom we were handed by World War No. 1! Money came easily—went easily. Everybody was splurging on everything. Prices went skying. Sugar eventually hit 28¢ a pound!

Bye-bye, boom. Factories closed; men laid off. Prices and wages sinking fast. With jobs scarce, some of that dough we'd blown would have come in mighty handy then.



Prosperity. Stocks up fifty points in a week. Again everybody was buying everything—regardless of cost. Depression? Phooey . . . We thought we'd found a way to *lick* depressions.

Or had we? Bread lines, apple venders. WPA. Prices dropping. Wages dropping. Everything dropping—except the mortgage. "What goes up must come down." Depression follows a rise.

We're splurging again. Americans have been earning more. But even today there are fewer goods to spend it on—so naturally prices rise. DON'T LET *IT* ALL HAPPEN AGAIN!

---

4 THINGS TO DO to keep prices down and help avoid another depression

1. Buy only what you really need.
2. When you buy, pay no more than the ceiling prices. Pay your ration points in full.
3. Keep your *own* prices down. Don't take advantage of war conditions to ask for more—for your labor, your services, or the goods you sell.
4. *Save.* Buy and hold all the War Bonds you can afford—to help pay for the war and insure your future. Keep up your insurance.

A United States War message prepared by the War Advertising Council; approved by the Office of War Information; and contributed by this magazine in cooperation with the Magazine Publishers of America.

is gone, Argyle gets to work," Solo spat. "He grabs your spread an' gets Alice to fog me off Circle Arrow."

"Alice isn't to blame," Nola declared. "She has to have someone to turn to and lean on during these terrible times, and Argyle's playing the dear old friend and advisor for all he's worth. I've no doubt he'll try to marry Alice, after everything's over with."

"Nola, that's it!" Solo exclaimed. "Argyle wants Alice, land, an' control around here—which means Mitoga in the sheriff's shoes. Mitoga wants to try for you, but your dad was in his way. So three men stood between 'em an' their wants, an' killin' your dad got rid of them all at once. They traded on the quarrel between your dad an' Belton. They find or steal Belton's handkerchief, an' Argyle reports hosses stolen to give Mitoga excuse to ride out. Belton's goin' to invite your dad to the weddin' was luck they hadn't counted on an' didn't need. So Mitoga stabs your dad, puts blood on that handkerchief, an' later rides in an' arrests Belton for murder."

"I'm confused," Nola muttered. "I can't connect—"

"Look," Solo interrupted. "Your dad's out of the way, Argyle takes over the TN an' advises you to treat Mitoga good. The sheriff will resign before he'll spring the trap under Belton, an' Mitoga will step into his shoes. If Jaeger didn't resign, his hangin' a good friend would turn folks ag'in him next election. There's two men out of the way, an' Belton's the third. When he's gone, Argyle will marry Alice an' get Circle Arrow. If she won't marry him, he stands to buy the ranch from her, because I doubt she'd keep it. Figgerin' that way, Argyle wanted to be sure Alice would be Belton's *widow* an' get Circle Arrow. That's why Mitoga waited outside the church until the weddin' was over, before he arrested Belton!"

"Oh, Lon, you're right!" Nola cried. "Go tell the sheriff, and have him arrest Argyle and Mitoga right away."

"Arrest 'em for what?" Solo shook his head. "We ain't got a speck of real proof, an' how far would the sheriff get, arrestin' his deputy an' the banker on

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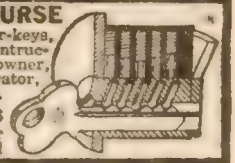

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nothin' but my say-so an' reckonin'?"

"If I were a man, I'd get proof if I had to beat it out of Argyle and Mitoga," Nola choked. "I'd not sit by and see a friend, an innocent man, go to the gallows without trying to save him."

" 'Specially if he'd taken you in, clothed you, an' stood by you when you needed help an' a friend, huh?" Solo meaningly added.

"I didn't mean that," Nola protested. "I know how you feel, and I've no right to blame you. But— Where are you going, Lon?" Nola broke off and asked as he headed for the door.

"Be back," Solo said, and went on out to his pony, racked in front of Luce's. Untying his possible sack, he took out a gunbelt and single-action Colt. Buckling the rig around himself, he looked across the street and saw Mitoga's horse in front of the bank. A cynical, cold expression on his face, Solo went back into the store.

"Nola," he requested, "give me a box of .45 ca'tridges. My belt's about empty, an' I want new shells in this old' cap-buster."

"Lon." Nola gulped. "Lon, what do you mean to do?"

"Ride yonderly, soon's I clean my conscience an' try to pay a debt." Solo thumbed new shells into his six-shooter. "I'd hoped you an' me— But never mind. One way or another, I'm done here."

"Killing won't help, and there's your vow," Nola reminded him.

"Killin' might help—if it ain't mine." Solo chuckled grimly. "An' I don't figger to break no vow. Mebbe my mind runs slaunchin', but I've got this deal figgered out where it's person'l with me."

"Personal?" Nola echoed. "But, Lon, outside of the fact that Mitoga dislikes you and told you to leave, what personal matter do you have against him and Sam Argyle?"

"Nothin' ag'in Argyle, yet. As for Blackie Mitoga, I got it ag'in him that the last gun-skunk I kilt in Arizona, the one that shot me through the lung, was named Ike Mitoga," Solo revealed.

"Ike Mitoga was Blackie's brother!" Nola exclaimed.

"Yeah." Solo nodded. "Now, if Blackie wants, he can take 'er up. If I down him, that'll turn into a person'l matter between me an' his boss, Argyle, an' when that happens, mebbe Argyle'll give up head about this an' that."

GRINNING wickedly, Solo looked out through the front window and saw Blackie Mitoga leave the bank and head toward Luce's. Without further ado, Solo hurried outside to meet him.

Mitoga was halfway across the street when Solo stepped off of the plank sidewalk and stopped. Seeing Solo's six-shooter, Mitoga halted in his tracks and barked, "I told yuh to keep goin', an' now I catch yuh around here packin' an iron contrary to the law."

"Then why don'tcha take the hardware off me an' run me out?" Solo jeered. "I'll tell you why, you yellow-gutted stump-sitter. You're good at stabbin' ol' men, but it comes to facin' a man in a draw-an'-shoot, you're as coyotin' as your brother, Ike, was. I ought to know, too, you black-whiskered buzzard. In Arizona, I was called the Solitary Kid, because my name's Solo an' I played a lone hand. It was the Solitary Kid that shot that sneakin' Ike, Blackie. You know it, but I doubt you got sand enough in your craw to do anything about it."

Shaken by the unexpectedness of Solo's rawhiding verbal attack, Mitoga, his face pale, stood with his shoulders hunched and his feet far apart. Staring at Solo, he weighed his chances and tried to swallow the fear that seemed to form a lump in his throat.

Silent, Solo waited, seeming to find a grim amusement in the struggle Mitoga was having with himself. Now, Solo raised his right hand and blew on it to warm it. The move was deliberate, aimed at making Mitoga think he had an edge. Mitoga did think that, and he went for his gun. Solo's hand lashed downward, he pulled his Colt and dropped the hammer just an instant before Mitoga's gun roared. The ragged jet of fire and the slug from the deputy's piece went skyward as he fell with Solo's bullet centered in his heart.

Along the street, doors were being

opened and men came out. Stopping at a cautious distance, they watched Solo walk out and kneel beside Mitoga. Pulling Mitoga to a sitting position against his knee, Solo put his left arm in back of the dead man's head.

"Yeah, Blackie," he said, his voice carrying far, "You're dyin'. . . . . What's that? You want to talk before you go?"

Solo moved his arm and Mitoga seemed to nod. Leaning, Solo seemed to be listening to the low words of a dying man, then said loudly, "So that's it, huh? Well, I'll see that he gets his, too. I had an' idea that Argyle ramrodded the whole damn' deal, an'—"

"Lon, look out!" Nola screamed from the doorway at Luce's, just as gunfire lashed from the doorway of the bank and a bullet ripped a deep, ragged gash in Solo's left side below the ribs.

Knocked flat, gasping for breath, Solo rolled over and surged back onto one knee, the six-shooter in his hand hammering. Sam Argyle's scream rose above the gun's thunder as the banker, his own gun flying out of his hand, rolled down the bank steps, across the walk and into the street.

Left palm pressed to his side, Solo rose and walked over and looked down at Argyle. Lying on his belly, Argyle clawed the frozen ground, but lacked the strength to rise.

"You've run your string," Solo grunted jerkily. "You had Mitoga kill Tom Norris, an' this's what come of it for you both."

"I did, but I'll never—hang—for—it," Argyle gurgled, and his life ran out with the words.

Swaying, Solo looked at the gathering crowd, and at Sheriff Jaeger, who came pushing through. "It's funny." Solo laughed drunkenly. "Mitoga an' me never talked about no trouble here, an' he never confessed nothin'. He was dead when I was pertendin' he was talkin', tellin' on Sam Argyle."

Again Solo looked at the crowd, shaking his head as though he couldn't see clearly. "A'right," he croaked. "Stare at me. Look at me like I ain't fit to breathe the same air, after I saved an innocent man from hangin', an' rid you of a pair

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•

If you've got a job today—for your own sake, fellow, be smart! Think twice before you fight for a wage increase that might force prices up and land you behind the eight-ball in the end.

Salt away as much as you can out of your present wages. Put money in the bank, pay up your debts, buy more life insurance. Above all, put every extra penny you can lay your hands on into Uncle Sam's War Bonds.

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And the best thing you can do for your own sake, brother, if there *should* be a depression ahead, is to get your finances organized on a sound basis of paid-up debts—and have a little money laid by to see you through!

4 THINGS TO DO
to keep prices down
and help avoid another depression

1. Buy only what you really need.

2. When you buy, pay no more than ceiling price. Pay your ration points in full.

3. Keep your *own* prices down. Don't take advantage of war conditions to ask for more—for your labor, your services, or the goods you sell.

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HELP US KEEP PRICES DOWN

A United States War message prepared by the War Advertising Council; approved by the Office of War Information; and contributed by this magazine in cooperation with the Magazine Publishers of America.

of low, murderin' snakes . . . Call me a killer, an' to hell with all of you!"

Things were whirling before Solo's eyes and inside of his head. He thought he was walking toward his horse, aiming to ride away from Centerfire and other folk's troubles. Then he heard a man cry, "He's bad hit. Lookit the blood on him. He's outta his head."

"Catch him," somebody else yelped. "He's a-fallin' . . . ."

IT was evening when Solo awakened from the sleep the doctor's drugs had induced, and found himself in the house where Nola and Alice lived. The doctor and Nola were in the room with him. Solo claimed he felt fine, and when he learned that Buck Belton had been released from jail, he insisted on seeing him. So the doctor gave in and let Buck and Alice Belton into the room.

Alice kissed Solo and wet his pale face with her tears. Buck gripped Solo's hand and grinned crookedly. Sounding like he had a frog in his throat, Belton hoorawed Solo, saying he sure was glad that, since Solo wouldn't mix in other people's troubles, he'd found some personal things to raise hell about in Centerfire.

"Nobody here owes me thanks or anything," Solo muttered. "So forget it, an' forget me. In a few days, I'll be up an' on my way."

"Why, Lon?" Nola sat down on the edge of the bed and took one of his hands in hers. "Why go, after you've lightened our lives?"

"You're the little hunk of yeast that raised us back, all right," Belton said. "Sort of a hot lead leavener, you might say."

"So don't leave, Lon. Why not stay?" Nola begged him.

"An' have folks eyein' me, brandin' me a killer, an'—"

"Hush, Lon," Nola scolded. "Alice, raise the front shade."

Alice raised the shade over a window overlooking the front yard. Slipping one arm under Solo's head, Nola raised him so he could see outside. There, hunched on the edge of the porch, or walking stiffly

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around trying to keep warm, Solo saw at least a dozen male and female citizens of Centerfire.

"*They* haven't branded you a killer, Lon," Nola said softly. "They're singing your praises They're my friends, Alice's, and Buck's, and your friends, too. They've been out there in the cold since you were brought here, waiting to hear you were past danger."

"Why, the sonuvaguns," Solo choked.

"You've got pards here, Lon," Belton assured him. "And the Circle Arrow's your home as long as you want it."

"Nola," Alice Belton sniffed, "men are so stupid about some things. My husband, for instance—offering Solo a home, when Solo already has a home and a lifetime job cinched down at the TN!"

"You mean these two— Ouch!" Buck Belton yelped as his wife took him by the ear and led him away to tell the folks outside that, inside, Lon Solo and Nola Norris were doing very well, indeed!

When the Smoke Dies Away

IN the first World War, there was a song that went, "Light your fag with a Lucifer and Smile, Smile, Smile." Somehow or other, the Tommy Atkins and the doughboy of that war learned that few puffs on a cigarette made you forget those hardships of trudging along all day and those longings to be home again with the whole family around Christmas time.

As a matter of fact, it is due to the first war that the cigarette finally gained its great popularity. Until that time, the cigarette was very poorly regarded in America. It was considered ill bred for young men to smoke it, and for a woman to indulge and be seen meant that she could consider herself divorced from polite society as a result forever after. But wars, for all their evils, many times result in great liberalizations, and now it is a common sight to see girls and women smoking away in public places.

The cigarette started off peacefully enough, but grew great on war. It first appeared in Brazil in the middle of the 1700's, where it was called the *papelito*. From there it passed on through Portugal and Spain and on into Europe. But it remained a little known pleasure until the Crimean War of 1856, when British soldiers, craving tobacco to ease their cares, discovered from the cigarette-smoking Turkish soldiers that it was cheaper to roll one's own than to buy ready-made cigars. It was Napoleon III, Emperor of the French, however, who, by his example in smoking the cigarette at Court, set all of Europe to smoking them.

That the cigarette is considered one of the best morale boosters in this war is evidenced by the fact that our High Command make sure that cigarette shipments get the highest priorities. The cigarette has even made its way into the various ration packages that are prepared for emergency purposes. Along with the condensed beef stew, vegetable soups, and coffee are small packages holding five cigarettes. There is nothing quite so comforting to a lonely soldier five thousand miles from home as to be able to enjoy the same cigarette that he smoked on Main Street in the good old days.

Five-Star Final

(Continued from page 43)

Well, sir, it seems the artist had done sort of a suggestive job. By sort of tipping the paper, you not only saw a crescent-shaped scar on John Doe's temple, but it was so shaded behind his head that a quick glimpse made it look like the robber had long-shoulder-length-hair! No wonder Brickley was right provoked, him being the only hairpin in these parts with hair like that.

Downstairs I went and took three fast drinks. Then I went back to the Acme, locked the door, and put the bureau against it, and went to sleep cursing Tientsin for getting me in a jam. It was easy to see, knowing what I knew, just how the land lay. Somewhere back in China Tientsin had known Brickley. Brickley had been a bad hombre. Now Brickley had his eye on Wang Toy, who had been so good to Tientsin. Naturally Tientsin, the crazy fool, was going to work against him all he could, so he'd slipped that false shading into his chalk block cartoon to set the town talking and hinting.

I got to thinking what a shart move it would be on Brickley's part to *be* John Doe. What if he'd been operating in these parts for eight months or so as a bandit, what if Beryl Anderson was party to the whole deal and had planted the big bad city marshal bug in her aged husband's brain. He could write Dodge; Brickley could have a pal answer—you see? And then, by God, he could be a marshal hunting himself!

I remember saying to myself, "Inky, you been reading books. Go to sleep!" And I did.

NEXT MORNING I was sweeping out my front office when China Sam came in. He looked at me steadily, stoically, as they say, and finally said, "Mister Maddox, have you seen Wang Toy?"

I said, "Nope, China Sam? What would I know about your kid?"

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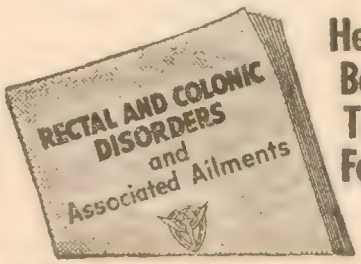

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He said, "This morning she took laundry to the Acme. She does not as yet return."

So I ran him off and went ahead cleaning the joint, wondering where I came in on the deal. Now cleaning up takes time. Besides I got sort of interested in some patent medicine literature I discovered and just drank my dinner, so it was around four o'clock when Tientsin came in. He was wearing his long black overcoat.

He said, "I say, old Chappie, didn't you tell me once you had a shotgun?"

I scratched my head. I said, "Reckon you mean that sawed-off museum piece Doc Holliday used in Tombstone?"

He nodded, and I showed him where it was at, and went on reading about Uncle Sam's Indian Remedy which was good for anything that ailed mankind.

"I hate to bother you," went on Tientsin," but would you mind taking a little walk with me? I need you, rather badly, too, old man."

I turned impatiently. I'd plumb forgot about the gun. And I guess I would have told him to beat it, except for the look on his face. I can't describe it, but I got right up from there and I got my coat and I got my hat. And in five minutes we were turning in at China Sam's laundry.

We walked right on through, and even in the front room of the adobe I could hear the wailing and smell the incense.

Wang Toy, dressed in a ceremonial kimona, las lying on a sort of bier in the bedroom. Incense filled the dark corners with deep smell, the light from three or four tapers flickered over her. Wang Toy wasn't doll-like any more. She was very, very dead, and her face was that of an old, old woman's. On his knees, swaying and wailing, was China Sam.

Tientsin said, "I just wanted you to understand, old chappie."

He moved some sage blossoms, and pulled the kimona off her shoulders. Me, I'm an old man, I've seen the elephant and heard the owl, but all I could do was growl, "Cover her up, cover her up!" It looked like a coyote had been working on her velvety skin.

And her right hand was missing!

THERE are times when I or any other man has to do what he is told to do. I gave the note to Bad Bill Brickley in Hinkey Dink's bar. He read it, said, "What is this, a joke?"

Bitterly I said, "Oh, no. Just another notch to add to your gun butts, Bad man. He said to tell you he was armed and ready, and for you to come ahead."

Brickley wadded the note and stuck it in his pocket. He said—and he was drinking with Anderson, "I don't want to kill this man. He is a poor harmless drunk. But he's threatening me." His eyes got sort of shrewd. "It may be," he said, sly-like, "there is more to this than meets the eye. Tientsin himself might be John Doe."

Anderson said, "You mean just pretending to be a drunk?"

He was talking to Brickley's back. I will admit that Brickley was not scared, but who would be—going to meet a drunken dog like Tientsin? Brickley walked out into the middle of the street and I followed a few seconds behind him—only I stayed on the sidewalk. Straight down Main Street he went, looking cautiously to right and left, his arms folded across his bosom. I thought about Beryl Anderson. But mostly I thought about little Wang Toy.

Then, down in the middle of the block, from the alley between the hardware and the stage office, slouched Tientsin. His overcoat dragged the street, his worn-out boots kicked up funny little spurts of dust. Right toward Brickley he walked. Brickley stopped and waited. When he was maybe fifteen yards away—so help me no more than that—Tientsin stopped. I couldn't hear what Brickley said.

But Brickley made that lightning move. Only it was sort of slow lightning that time. For Tientsin had Doc Holliday's sawed-off shotgun hanging on a thong beneath his right arm. All he had

to do was swing up and blast. It looked like Brickley's whole head flew off!

Tientsin looked at him curious-like and walked right past us and into the saloon. I went out to Brickley.

It wasn't his hat that flew off. It was his blond wig. And in spite of his blasted face, you could see a big crescent-shaped scar sort of half on his temple and half above his ear—just like in that cartoon! So all my detecting, all my imagining was correct! Bad Bill Brickley was John Doe, our local bandit!

I got back to Hinkey Dink's, meaning to interview the new town killer. I was a little late. He'd already jumped around nearly a quart of rotgut. I managed to make a little sense out of his statements, however. Remember, them Chinese characters I told you was in the corner of each chalk block engraving?

Tientsin said, "Old chappie, I never made your engravings. It was Wang Toy. That's her name, those characters, and I knew Brickley was the only man in Red Bank besides China Sam and myself that could read them. He had to get even. You saw what he did."

I took a drink, but quick, remembering what he did.

I said, "I know, Tientsin, the Chinese have been good to you. But how in God's world did you gear yourself up to facing death like that?"

Well, sir, he said a funny thing. And he didn't look like Fido, or even like the king of drunks, Tientsin. He drew himself up, and his eyes flashed, and he smiled sort of hard and proud-like, and he said, sternly, "Maddox, haven't you heard of the white man's burden?"

Then he took another drink, and laying his head on his arms, began to cry. I went on back to the plant, newspaperman or not, for I couldn't print *that* story. It wasn't just Wang Toy he was crying for. It was for all the miserable, misspent years of his youth, when he'd clean forgotten that same burden—the one he finally remembered.

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The Dare-Devil Commandos

THE scene is the muddy part of France, and there are ribbons of vermin-infested trenches criss-crossing the terrain. The time is March, 1918. At last America is an active participant in the war against Germany. Half a million of her men are holding the positions only recently relinquished by the battle-weary French and British. A tired, begrimed U. S. Army captain, taking a few moments off from the intense strain and vigilance of waiting for something to happen, is sitting at a crude table in a dugout. He is writing a letter home to his wife, and the letter goes something like this:

"Dear Mary: I can't tell you where we are. But we've been here six weeks now, and there's been no action of any kind. We just wait for a chance to move, but it never comes. The German positions are so strong that if we attempted to move, we would be mowed down by their gunfire. It sure is funny how boring war is, and how little action you get. But the fellows higher up say this is a slow war, and that you have to stay in one place for a long time. Well, it won't be long now. The major has it on good authority that we're going to have some action soon, and then maybe I'll bring home a couple of souvenirs."

Those were the days of World War I. Armies moved very slowly. There was no other way of advancing than to have long, thick lines of infantry smash through enemy fortifications at the snail's pace of two or three miles a day. For then the speed of an army was measured in different terms. An army advanced as fast as a man could walk. And the accepted theory was that no battle could be won without the use of the infantry as the fighting and occupying force.

However, today we find ourselves living in different times, and, although Germany is again our opponent, that would seem to be the only point of similarity between the two wars. It is not enough to say that this war is a completely mechanized one; the important thing is that today's war seems to be in the hands of better planners. No longer is the sheer weight of manpower the deciding factor. Clever machines need clever men. The keynote now is brains.

We have discovered that only the artful combination of all our resources will make for victory. The civilian front is part of the total war front just as, we shall see, the army, the navy, and the air force are all part of the fighting front. This new technique, for want of a better term, is called *Combined Operations*, and is employed mostly by the British in carrying out their Commando raids.

All that Combined Operations means is that the navy helps the army, and the air force helps both. It seems strange that one service should not help the other, but years ago the jealousies among the various services were so strong that any sort of co-operation was virtually impossible. However, the common enemy has united them all, so that now teamwork is more important than mere personal glory.

THE most important units of Combined Operations are the Commandos. These are the men who, in the last analysis, must bear the brunt of every sortie and upon whom the success or failure of any mission will always depend. We have all read about their daring exploits in the newspapers, and we probably think that they are some mysterious race of supermen. Actually, nothing could be further from the truth, for they are just normal, high-spirited young men, healthy of course, who by reason of special training are able to meet the special demands made upon them.

When, in the early part of 1940, the British Army first realized its particular need for a fast striking force to harass the Nazis on their home ground, they decided to train a group of men for the specific task of always fighting in the position of the underdog. For these men would always meet the enemy on the

enemy's side of the fence, and they would always be greatly outnumbered.

They decided to call these men Commandos. The name "Commando" is historically famous. For it was guerilla bands who called themselves Commandos who made life miserable for the British during the Boer War by their amazing exploits and who, though small in number, succeeded in prolonging that war.

One does not become a Commando just because he has the brawn and physical endurance. While strength and agility are important, something more is needed. That something is intelligence, the ability to think one's way out of the most trying of circumstances. A Commando must have personality, and he must, above all, be an individual. He must be friendly and make friends easily. For the Commando slogan is "Me and my pal". Their success depends on teamwork, and any man who cannot work with another in harmony is out.

Commandos work in teams of twos. If Joe is a Bren-gunner or an anti-tank rifleman, then Bob is his number-two man and handles the magazines. If Joe is sent out on scouting detail, then Bob is sure to be sent with him. Or if Bob is on KP, then Joe will be sure to lend a hand. For friendship between two men engaged in the business of war is as old as human conflict itself. There have been Achilles and Patroclus, David and Jonathan, Roland and Oliver; their names may change with the years, but the spirit of comradeship remains and lives on. Friendship is recognized in the Commandos. It is fostered and cherished, for their officers know that men fight not only with steel, but also with heart.

The training conditions are strenuous, of course. But they are well within the endurance of most healthy young men. The emphasis is on young men, however, since only young men could hope to survive. Since a man must be in perfect condition to endure, the Commando trainee is marched countless miles over all kinds of country, the hillier the better. First there is the ten-mile march; and then the fifteen; and then twenty-five

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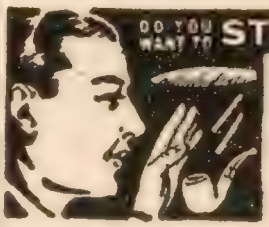

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miles. Finally, these men are called upon to do sixty and seventy miles in one stretch. And their time to finish is severely limited! Toward the end of this phase of training, they may have to march seventy miles, under forced march conditions with full battle equipment on their backs, in less than twenty hours.

After various exercises have toughened these men sufficiently, they are then taught how to traverse the widest streams, carrying full fighting equipment. How they are taught to swim in rivers loaded down with sixty or seventy pounds will always remain a mystery. But what is that compared to climbing steep cliffs when loaded down with various weapons by means of what amounts to the extensions on their fingernails?

THE Commando is given a pretty complete taste of battle conditions while in training. For weeks, he is called upon to cross over endless fields amid exploding booby traps, and live machine-gun and shell fire. Being now fairly well accustomed to the noise and confusion of a battlefield, the Commando is then trained in the niceties of hand-to-hand combat.

What they learn is a combination of boxing, wrestling, jiu-jitsu, savate, and plain manslaughter. And it is all dirty. What part of the back to send the dagger or knife through in order to kill the German sentry is very important. Because, if the knife is used properly, death is accomplished almost noiselessly. Eye-gouging, and all its finer points, are explained to eager audiences. The well-placed kick in the groin, the effective use of hobnailed boots, the proper application of the brass-knuckle, the correct way of snapping the arm at the elbow—these and many other methods of mayhem must be thoroughly learned before a Commando can hope to get into action.

It may be argued that these tactics are not exactly in the best sporting tradition, but this is war, and it is a case simply of eliminating the other fellow before he has a chance to kill you.

Since the Commandos are at sea very much of the time, since all their objectives are within the "Hitler Fortress", they are also given a thorough indoctrination into seamanship. They learn enough about boats to feel perfectly at home in them. They become familiar with the tides and the currents, with the various methods of navigation, with the operation and maintenance of various marine engines. If, in the course of their adventures, they should be fortunate enough to capture an enemy ship, they will know how to man her and bring her back to port.

At last the Commando has finished his training. But only as to land and sea. He has not reckoned with the R.A.F. He has yet to learn something about conducting himself in the air. He is given an indoctrination into the mysteries of parachute jumping, for the Commando must also be able to drop from a speeding plane behind enemy lines. But, after completing the other parts of his training, he does not find this too difficult. He rather relishes it, because he does not have to do any marching over land or any ploughing through seas. All he has to do is jump, and after all he has been through, nothing could be easier.

HAVING been thoroughly trained in land, sea, and air combat, the Commando is now ready to go out on a mission. What will it be this time, Norway or France? To him it makes no difference. And it is the Combined Operations Staff which makes his plans. Now it is that the term "Combined Operations" takes on significance, for this means that the army, the navy, and the air force, in a spirit of close co-operation, arrange for his transport and well-being in enemy-occupied territory. The navy helps him get to his objective, the air force watches over him, and he himself finally carries the mission to its successful conclusion.

Thus it is that, shortly before midnight on September 2nd, 1942, Ober Maat (Chief Mate) Munte, who had once been a stoker in the German Navy, was seated in his office in the Casquet Islands, which had been seized by the Nazis in July, 1940. Mr. Munte was busy filling out some German naval forms. There was a slight noise which caused him to turn in his chair.

Leaning against the door were two men with black faces, wearing crumpled khaki uniforms which were damp about the ankles. Two Colt automatics, poised casually, were in their hands. Was the Chief Mate dreaming? No, those men were there! But how did they get there? Herr Munte fainted. A short while later, he was in a bobbing boat on the way to England, as a prisoner. By that time, the six men who formed his command were also prisoners. It took only two Commandos to make seven Germans captive, and to destroy an important military installation.

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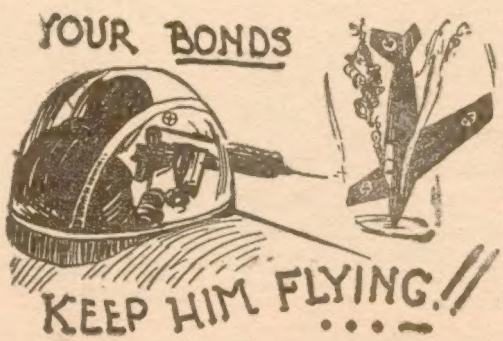

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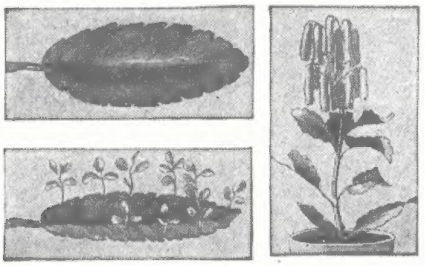

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